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Special Issue: Beyond Italian exceptionalism?

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Beyond Italian Exceptionalism? The 'Critical' Eighteenth Legislature

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Abstract

Italy's eighteenth legislative term stands out as particularly idiosyncratic throughout Italian history. Over the course of this term, three governments with varying political orientations came into power, relying on parliamentary votes that shifted between the right, left, and centre. In this article, we aim to highlight these peculiarities and explore whether they indicate a further complexification of Italy's already intricate governmental history, or if they instead reflect issues that are prevalent in most Western democracies. In addition to briefly presenting the articles included in the Special issue, in the last section the article will attempt to take stock of the eighteenth legislature, analyzing its legacy for the Italian political system and trying to identify those factors that are bound to characterize Italian politics in the future as well.

1. Introduction

Italy's eighteenth republican legislative term could rightfully be considered the most eccentric of a series of rather peculiar Italian republican legislatures. Three governments of rather different political orientation succeeded each other, finding their legitimation in parliamentary votes that fluctuated from right to left to center. In this Introduction, we highlight some of these oddities and discuss whether they signal a further complexification of the already rather complex governmental history of the country, or rather reveal problems that are common to most Western democracies. We further wonder whether, as is often the case, the most extreme manifestation of an event occurs when the causes underlying it are already on the wane, and we therefore must expect a 'normalization' of Italian politics from now on.

Italy is known in the literature for having had a record number of governments succeeding one another during its republican phase, from 1948 onward (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007; Pasquino 2019). Up to six different governments were formed and voted down during the second, fifth and seventh legislatures, marking the zenith of the exceptional governmental instability of what is commonly denoted as the 'first Italian Republic' (1948-1992) (though see Mershon 2002 for an interesting contrast between high governmental instability and surprising continuity in governmental personnel). The 'second Italian Republic' (from 1993 onward, though it is debated whether we had

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already entered a third and perhaps even a fourth republican period, see Tebaldi 2022) was instead marked by relatively greater governmental stability, with an average of fewer than three governments per legislature, but by an increasing diversity in government composition and greater innovativeness in the way government majorities were formed and held together. In addition to the fourth 'technical government' led by Mario Draghi (after those led by Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Lamberto Dini and Mario Monti during the eleventh, twelfth and sixteenth legislative terms), in the eighteenth term we witnessed the alternation in government of majorities of rather different (if not opposite) orientations, the first two led by the same prime minister (Conte I and Conte II governments), who was, to some extent, at least initially, also a non-politician!

The alternation between political and technocratic governments has characterized the Italian political system since the early 1990s, when two significant changes occurred: the 'political earthquake' brought about by the Clean Hands investigations (Gilbert 1995) and the decision, at Maastricht, to create a common currency and, therefore, the need for Italy to commit to fiscal stabilization. The decision to progressively disentangle monetary decisions from the needs of the Italian government to finance its debt had been made well before Maastricht (the famous 'divorce' of the Bank of Italy from the Treasury occurred in 1982 and became a reference case study, Epstein and Schor 1986) but after Maastricht what had initially been a recalibration of public debt seniority and a mild check on public deficits became an absolute imperative. The 'external constraint' – which was supposed to force Italian authorities down a virtuous fiscal path (Ferrera and Gualmini 1999) – dates from this period. It is this imperative that has motivated the periodic formation of technocrat-led governments capable of imposing much needed but much dreaded sacrifices onto an electorate on whose support they did not depend.

In this special issue we ask ourselves whether the peculiarity of Italian politics further accelerated during the eighteenth legislature, reaching unprecedented levels even by Italian standards or rather the long search for governmental stability has been so affected by the exceptional circumstances that have characterized the last thirty years – particularly the Euro and Covid crises, not to mention the migration and the Ukrainian war crises – that even the apparent 'normalization' of Italian politics, with different majorities alternating in government between the twelfth and seventeenth legislatures, has been once more postponed and high-jacked. We further wonder whether the long-coveted 'normalization' of Italian politics is now on the horizon. We contend that the unique developments of Italian politics during the eighteenth legislature reveal tensions and problems that are in fact common to many European and non-European democracies during these turbulent times, and expose the difficulties of these democracies to govern in times of heightened interdependence.

2. The long quest for governmental stability

Perhaps the most distinctive trait of post-war Italian politics is the accentuated instability of its governmental majorities. Remedying such instability has been the goal of many electoral reforms and the object of endless expert debates, particularly after the demise of the so-called 'first Italian Republic' (D'Alimonte 2005; Ceccanti and Vassallo 2004). Governmental instability was initially attributed to the extreme polarization of Italian

politics, which forced governments to be formed by litigious coalitions under the fractious leadership of Christian Democracy (DC) – a predicament that was described by Giovanni Sartori as 'polarized pluralism' (Sartori 1976). These traits pre-empted the formation of alternative coalitions, a situation dubbed by Giorgio Galli 'imperfect bipartyism' (Galli 1966). According to both, the Italian political system appeared immune to the process of normalization that characterized other political systems and that allowed elsewhere a peaceful alternation in government between coalitions of different colorations. Only France and Finland appeared as polarized and as resistant to normalization, according to Sartori (1982).

Situated at the centre of a party system traversed by centrifugal forces, Christian Democracy (DC) was at the same time the headstone of many Italian governments and the cause of their inner brittleness. Unchallenged by alternative coalitions, Christian Democracy's internal factions could freely vie for governmental jobs and other plum positions, thus lending extreme instability to governmental majorities often identical to one another in all but the minutest compositional details (Venditti 1981). As is known, this situation became increasingly untenable, and was the cause of lavish disbursements of public funds to keep this or that political clientele happy (LaPalombara 1964; Pritoni 2017).

From the 1980s onward, Christian Democracy was increasingly challenged by new formations: the rejuvenated and modernized Italian Socialist party (PSI) under the leadership of Bettino Craxi, the various ethno-regionalist parties that later federated into the Lega Nord (LN) (Diamanti 1996; Biorcio 2010), and an Italian Communist Party (PCI) that managed to wean itself from the tutelage of the Soviet Union and to attract increasing numbers of young voters because of its capacity to govern well at the regional and municipal levels. The breaking point came, at the beginning of the 1990s, with the 'Clean Hands' investigations that caused the almost complete disappearance of the historical post-war parties, DC and PSI (Cafagna 2012), the troubled transformation of the PCI into Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) (Ignazi 1992), then Democratici di Sinistra (DS) and finally Partito Democratico (PD), the re-foundation of the old neo-fascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), into a post-fascist party called Alleanza Nazionale (AN) (Ignazi 2023), and the emergence of a brand-new party, Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) (Ignazi 2014).

These – FI, AN, Lega Nord and PDS – were the main parties that characterized the 'second Italian Republic' between 1993 and 2013. During this period, Italy experienced a certain process of bipolarization, but the brittleness of Italian governments was far from over. Rather patchy and litigious coalitions managed to alternate in government, without, however, stabilizing the Italian political system (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2011). So, just when all political novelties seemed to have been exhausted, two new developments marked the further evolution of the Italian political system: the emergence of a populist movement – the Five Star Movement (FSM) – under the dual leadership and inspiration of comedian Beppe Grillo and computer guru Gianroberto Casaleggio (Campus et al. 2021; Tronconi 2015; Corbetta 2018), and the renaming of the post-fascist party AN as Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) (Vassallo and Vignati 2023). A further development was the attempt of the Lega Nord to extend its leadership beyond its northern strongholds and the consequent shedding of its label of the geographical qualifier, becoming now simply the Lega (Albertazzi et al. 2018).

Handmaidens of these party system transformations were a series of electoral reforms, each inspired by the attempt to make the formation of governmental coalitions more immediately dependent on electoral results and, therefore, hopefully more stable (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995; D'Alimonte and Fusaro 2008). The two camps or poles (the 'People of Liberties' on the center-right and the 'Popular Democrats' on the center-left) made timid attempts to legitimize each other and thus ease the normalization of Italian democracy between roughly 1993 and 2013, without much success (Ieraci 2013). A series of crises stalled this process and revealed the precariousness of this attempt. The increasing frequency with which, between 1993 and 2022, political governments were replaced by 'technocratic governments' (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014) is testimony to the difficulty of electing 'responsive and responsible' governments (Mair 2013) in a context of heightened interdependence and during increasingly turbulent times.

It is probably the perception of the Italian electorate that, no matter how hard political parties tried to establish the appearance of a responsive party or coalition government, contextual circumstances and previous international agreements limited their space for manoeuver, which sealed the period of bipolarism. This outcome was most certainly the effect of the financial turbulence unleashed by the US subprime crisis (2007-08), which in turn triggered an international financial crisis and eventually the Euro crisis (2009-2015) that particularly enveloped the more exposed economies – Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Italy – of the Eurozone (Morlino and Raniolo 2017). The austerity measures enforced by the ECB and the European Council from 2010 cut deep into the flesh of a country like Italy that had already made a sustained effort, since 1992, to reduce its public debt and thus become eligible to adopt the Euro from its inception.

The perception among Italian voters that their economic sovereignty was severely limited by commitments made in the past (the Maastricht criteria) and even more by commitments imposed by the other partners during the crisis (suffice to mention the Fiscal Compact that Italy had to underwrite in 2012 and the strengthening of Stability and Growth Pact rules in 2011 and 2013) fostered growing criticism, and sometimes veritable skepticism, vis-à-vis the process of European integration (Cotta and Isernia 2021). These perceptions were compounded by the migrant crisis that erupted in 2014, caused by the growing inflow of illegal immigrants from northern Africa and by the feeling of being left alone to face this new emergency by outdated Dublin accords that no other member state had a real interest in revising.

Perceptions of reduced economic sovereignty and of inexistent or reluctant solidarity between member states (Basile et al. 2021) ultimately fanned the winds of populism that grew in Italy as well as in many other countries. It would be hard to find a European (and non-European) country in which populist or nationalist parties did not achieve substantial electoral successes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, managing to conquer governmental power at the regional level (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Pappas 2019; Zulianello 2019). Disillusioned by many rounds of electoral reforms (1993, 2001, 2005) that had not managed to stabilize the political system and had not given back that 'control' that had supposedly escaped them since the creation of the Euro, Italian voters have been perhaps more disposed than other

national electorates to give credit to new formations and to shift their support from one party or coalition to another. The frustration may have been further intensified by the awareness that other, more structural problems of the Italian political system did not seem to find any durable solution. Among these, the prolonged weakness of the Italian economy (Notermans and Piattoni 2020), the enfeeblement of the Italian public health system due to painful and repeated cuts to welfare provisions that further exacerbated existing inequalities (Franzini and Raitano 2018), and the never-resolved issue of a bureaucracy apparently incapable of overseeing the speedy and efficient use of public resources to promote growth and territorial cohesion (Di Mascio and Natalini 2018; Polverari and Piattoni 2022).

3. The exceptional eighteenth legislature: the apex of Italian exceptionalism?

The developments described above came to a head during the eighteenth legislature and are well documented by the articles of this special issue. All share a common longitudinal comparative perspective, although the authors were free to focus on the aspects that they felt were more relevant. As much as the last legislature was indeed exceptional in several respects, it is nevertheless the result of some long-term factors that have characterized Italian political development. The comparative diachronic perspective here adopted allows us to analyze the structural factors that have conditioned the evolution of the Italian political system, in conjunction with some more contingent elements, such as exogenous shocks and the different crises of various kinds, that have recently hit Italy (along with other countries).

From this analytical perspective, the article by Luca Pinto, which is devoted to the analysis of (frequent and increasing) party switching in the last legislature, shows how the highly unstructured or fluid nature of the Italian party system ended up conditioning not only the relations between parties and voters at election times, but also the parliamentary dynamics themselves (Pinto, 2022). Indeed, the period between two elections has itself become a powerful generator of party fragmentation and systemic deinstitutionalization, with micro-parties, often of a personalistic nature (Calise 2010), arising from within the legislative assembly and then seeking electoral support – a phenomenon that distorts electoral responsiveness and obfuscates the mechanism of democratic accountability. What is more, the phenomenon of party switching and the related creation of new parties of exclusively parliamentary origin directly affect the recurring fluctuations of the electoral market observed on the demand side. This means that supply-induced fragmentation (generated from within the legislative arena) has an impact on the level of electoral volatility, thus creating a downward spiral of party system deconsolidation.

However, beyond the enduring deinstitutionalization of the party system [Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2021], another long-term element observed in the eighteenth legislature was the willingness of voters to change their political preferences and behaviors. In this respect, Nicola Maggini and Cristiano Vezzoni (2022) note the presence of what they term in their article 'multiple availabilities' on the demand side of the electoral market. Voters are willing to change their political choices in relatively short periods of time – all the more so, given that during a relatively short timeframe there have been at least three major crises, from the Great Recession to the Covid-19

pandemic, to the recent international crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, capable of changing the structure of Italian voters' preferences. However, in the face of the great fluidity of the Italian electoral and party landscape, the analysis conducted by Maggini and Vezzoni reveals the existence of another long-term factor in the Italian political system, namely, the greater cohesion or overlap of the center-right electorate compared to the more divided center-left electorate. This is a feature that was further reinforced during the course of the eighteenth legislature and that led, in the 2022 parliamentary elections, to the emergence of that 'asymmetric bipolarism' (Vassallo and Verzichelli 2023) – or 'imperfect bipolarism' to echo an older expression already mentioned (Galli 1967) – that is neatly unbalanced in favor of the center-right coalition.

The exceptionalism of the eighteenth legislature is even more pronounced if one interprets this phase as a synthesis of the political events of the entire 'second Italian republic' inaugurated in 1993. On the one hand, as highlighted above, the crumbling of the party system and the level of electoral volatility have been taken to extremes. On the other hand, what was once, especially during the first republican phase, party government 'Italian-style' (LaPalombara 1987) has been gradually replaced by governments led by populist forces or technocratic figures. Indeed, the last cabinets supported by traditional mass-based parties in the early 1990s were followed, in 1993, by the technocratic government led by Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, and in the following decades, at different intervals, governments led by or composed largely of populist leaders were followed by other technocratic governments (such as the one headed by Mario Monti between 2011 and 2013). This kind of atypical alternation between populism and technocracy (which, in Mair's terms, we could describe as fluctuation between phases of 'irresponsible responsiveness' and 'unresponsive responsibility') found its ultimate synthesis precisely in the eighteenth legislature. This began with a government composed for the first time entirely of populist parties (Valbruzzi 2018) and ended with a cabinet led by the emblem of all European technocrats, former ECB President Mario Draghi (Garzia and Karremans 2021).

Despite these pendulum swings between populism and technocracy, the three governments formed during the eighteenth legislature showed some trends in the formation of cabinets and the choice of individual ministers similar to past decades. In particular, as Andrea Pedrazzani and Michelangelo Vercesi's (2022) analysis regarding the patterns of reselection and promotion of ministers shows, more than individual factors (such as gender) or structural factors (such as the prestige of the ministerial office or the party size), what counts in the composition of the ministerial team is the previous political experience of the would-be rulers. This confirms a long-standing trend in the Italian political system, namely that of 'decentralized personalization' within cabinets, where greater weight is carried by individual ministers with their respective personal political followings than by other more objective features. It is worth stressing that this is a form of decentralized personalization which, as Balmas et al. (2014, 37) note, may go hand in hand with that form of 'centralized personalization', also commonly known as 'presidentialization' (Poguntke and Webb 2005), that has steadily characterized Italian politics and its executives for more than three decades.

If we now move from the level of politics to the level of policies, we once again observe signs of innovation introduced by the three governments of the eighteenth legislature, which, however, had to come to terms with some structural features of the Italian political system. This description applies in particular to the reforms introduced in the Italian welfare state, analyzed in great detail by Igor Guardiancich, Ilaria Madama and Marcello Natili (2022). The article investigates the extent to which the social policies adopted by the governments of the eighteenth legislature represent a substantial break with the previous institutional legacy, also in light of a rapidly changing socio-economic context, affected since 2020 by the dramatic Covid-19 health emergency and its consequences. In the face of what the authors describe as a 'frozen landscape' (Guardiancich et al. 2023, 76), with a welfare state long characterized by distinctive functional and distributive distortions, some new measures were introduced between 2018 and 2022 that can indeed be interpreted as 'path-departing reforms'. We refer especially to those reforms enacted in less costly and institutionalized policy fields, where there was the potential to expand social protection onto previously neglected (and politically weak or dispersed) constituencies (the poor, families, etc.). Among these were anti-poverty measures (starting with *the Reddito di cittadinanza*), which finally overcame one of the main weaknesses of the Italian welfare state, that is, the lack of a safety net guaranteeing income protection to all poor (Italian) individuals, and some pro-family policies, such as the introduction of the Single Universal Allowance and some significant investments in other childcare services. However, alongside these policy innovations that involved a recalibration of the Italian welfare state and reduced some historical distortions, in other areas – such as pensions and the labor market – path-dependency ended up prevailing, through the introduction of reforms that strengthened the traditional Italian approach to welfare, prioritizing pensions by means of well-established insider-biased policies (as in the case of *Quota 100*).

It is important to note that many of the reforms introduced in the social welfare sector have occurred primarily in the wake of, or as a response to, exogenous factors, such as the pandemic outbreak, that opened unexpected windows of opportunity for changing the status quo. However, while these external shocks triggered a reform process in some areas of welfare, the same cannot be said for the modernization of Italy's public administration. As Fabrizio Di Mascio, Alessandro Natalini and Stefania Profeti show in their article, beyond the populist rhetoric about the need for radical changes in the structure of public administration, the two governments led by Giuseppe Conte were characterized by a substantial 'decoupling of talk and action on the issue of administrative reform' (Di Mascio et al. 2022, 102). This means that once they came to government, populist parties quickly adapted to the previous situation, leaving the overall structure of the bureaucratic apparatus unchanged, without 'any significant reform efforts in two key areas that are typically targeted by populist parties in government that aim to "dismantle" or "capture" the state, namely the appointment of senior civil servants and the reorganization of the state apparatus' (Di Mascio et al. 2022, 102).

Italian public administration thus confirmed its traditional, decades-long resistance to change despite the many efforts to remedy its well-known 'backwardness' (Fabbrini 2013, 428) and the need for its modernization. What is even more significant

is that the veto power of the Italian public administration remained basically intact even after the arrival of the Draghi government and the acceptance of the absolute priority, so strongly emphasized by the new supranational governance, to implement some badly needed 'structural reforms' (among them also the overhaul of legal procedures with the aim of shortening the length of civil litigation) before the funds of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) could be released. Although the salience of administrative reforms as an enabling factor for the implementation of the NRRP did indeed grow in the latter part of the legislature, the policies adopted 'can be qualified as loosely interconnected and piecemeal' (Di Mascio et al. 2022, 101) rather than as a set of consistent interventions capable of profoundly transforming the structure and functioning of the Italian public administration.

Finally, the last factor that is now structural to Italian politics is an increasing integration with the supranational political arena, represented by the European Union (EU). Long considered by both experts and politicians as an 'external constraint' (Dyson and Featherstone 2007) capable of conditioning public policies in Italy and pushing the country in the direction of greater 'responsibility' in the area of fiscal policies, after the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to the subsequent economic crisis, the EU has progressively loosened its austerity measures putting in place 'interventionist' public policies and economic support for the countries severely affected by the crisis. This 'new social Europe', no longer viewed as an 'austere stepmother' but rather as a 'caring mother', caught the Italian governments of the eighteenth legislature off guard, starting with those composed mostly of populist parties.

It is precisely the changed relationships between the EU's supranational institutions and the Italian governments of the eighteenth legislature that are the focus of the article by Roberto Di Quirico (2022). In particular, he highlights the policy U-turn of the Conte I government, which began on vaguely Euroskeptic positions and then gradually became absorbed by the mechanisms and constraints of European governance. In the reconstruction provided by Di Quirico, the three cabinets formed during the eighteenth legislative term depict the three stages of gradual rapprochement between the two decision-making arenas, i.e. the national and the supranational: from the 'challenging the EU' approach adopted by the first Conte government, through the intermediate stage of 'begging the EU' by the second Conte government amid the pandemic, and then ended with the 'pleasing the EU' stage with the government led by Mario Draghi, created to foster a more effective implementation of the NRRP.

This historical reconstruction reveals at least two noteworthy aspects. First, despite the anti-system and anti-establishment charge of the populist actors, la *force tranquille* of the EU's supranational institutions has shown itself capable of absorbing internally the challenges coming from some member states and progressively including them in the complex, accommodating governance of the EU. Second, European institutions can no longer be viewed, somewhat narrowly, simply as an 'external constraint' on national political systems. The EU should increasingly be seen and studied, particularly in light of the effects of the pandemic and then the Russian attack on Ukraine, as an essential component of a *sui generis* multilevel political system capable of conditioning both the political dynamics and policy choices of individual member states. As far as Italy is concerned, this complex multilevel governance emerged profoundly changed during the

course of the eighteenth legislature: above and beyond the changes of government triggered by general elections, the national executives formed in the future will inevitably have come to terms with this.

4. Where is the Italian political system going? The legacy of the eighteenth legislature

What is ultimately the political and institutional legacy of the eighteenth legislature? Or at least what lessons can be learned for the present and future of the Italian political system? In our view, there are at least four lessons that are worth bearing in mind.

The first lesson is that the Italian political system, despite its continued deinstitutionalization (or perhaps because of it), is still capable of absorbing both internal and external challenges. Regarding the domestic challenges, Italian liberal democracy has indeed managed to integrate in the system some political parties that entered the scene with a strong anti-systemic connotation and upholding ideals – such as binding online direct consultation with party members or the introduction of the imperative mandate for members of parliament[1] – that are at odds with the principles of representative democracy. In the Italian case, unlike in many other European political systems, populist parties did not limit themselves to gaining representation in the legislative assemblies, but impetuously crossed the 'threshold of executive power' (Rokkan 1970), conquering and dominating governmental offices. Nevertheless, the institutions of representative democracy, on the one hand, have facilitated the reduction of political polarization produced by the breakthrough of populism and, on the other hand, have enabled the transformation of anti-system political actors into stable (and essentially loyal) components of the political system. All this happened in the space of not even a decade, moreover in an international context characterized by profound upheavals.

As for the external challenges to which Italian democracy has been exposed, they have been numerous, unforeseen, of different kinds (economic, health, diplomatic, etc.) and requiring timely reactions by political institutions. We refer not only to the long-term consequences of the Great Recession, but especially to the health emergency due to the spread of Covid-19, the subsequent economic difficulties that emerged in international markets, and, finally, the war that broke out in the heart of Europe between Russia and Ukraine, again with significant socio-economic consequences for Italy. Many analysts, pundits and scholars feared that democracies, starting with the most fragile and least consolidated ones, might weaken to the point of collapse (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk and Foa 2016; Bartels 2023). Instead, as far as the Italian case is concerned, despite various forms of protest and some signs of disaffection toward institutions and political actors, the political system has been able to react promptly, avoiding or limiting some possible excesses (such as, for example, the expansion of powers for the head of the government during a prolonged state of emergency). Thus, despite obvious difficulties,

[1] This was, at least, the original ambition. The actual use of this instrument revealed strong manipulative behavior on the part of the party leaders, with the dominance of top-down over bottom-up, inclusive processes of decision-making. This eventually led to the emergence of that form of plebiscitarian 'reactive democracy' (Gerbaudo 2021) in which members were simply called upon to ratify decisions already made by leadership.

Italian democracy, with its fluid party system, still passed the stress test of a literally 'critical legislature'.

The second lesson is institutional in nature and concerns, precisely, the functioning and quality of Italian political institutions. Despite a constitutional framework constantly under criticism, with an institutional transition that opened in the early 1990s and that no one seems able, or willing, to conclude, the Italian political system nevertheless seems to have found its own way of functioning, through mechanisms and safety valves of internal self-regulation. As discussed above, Italy is the only country in Western Europe that, after the demise of its mass-based parties, gave birth to a strange form of alternation between populisms and technocratic governments – that is, of cycles of varying duration in which total electoral responsiveness was followed by phases of complete institutional responsibility, a bit like a dog chasing its own tail (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021). If in the first republican phase it was the mass bureaucratic parties that ensured some sort of balance between responsiveness and responsibility, in the next phase the balance was produced only in cyclical form: populist waves created the conditions for the arrival of technocrats without direct electoral legitimacy who, in turn, fueled forms of protest against the establishment.

From this perspective, the events and cabinets of the eighteenth legislature have been the epitome of this new, all-Italian, cyclical balance between phases of irresponsible responsiveness and unresponsive responsibility: during the eighteenth legislature, in particular, from a government born ventilating the specter of an 'Italexit', Italy ended up with a cabinet led by a pro-European technocrat supported, albeit unwillingly, also by populist parties.

It should be added, moreover, that the Italian political system has also been able to rely, as a rebalancing mechanism, on the flexibility granted by its parliamentary regime and, in particular, by the figure of the head of state, often described by jurists as 'the most enigmatic and elusive among the public offices provided for in the Constitution' (Paladin 1986, 165). To a significant extent, the cabinet instability that continues to characterize the Italian political system has been counterbalanced by the figure of the President of the Republic, a factor of institutional stability and continuity. It is not by chance that, during the last legislature, we witnessed the reiteration of what in 2013 (with the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano) was considered an absolute exception. Indeed, the re-election of Sergio Mattarella to the Presidency of the Republic in 2022, in the face of a possible political stalemate, confirms the growing centrality of the head of state in the Italian institutional setting, transforming a neutral political figure into a political actor who is increasingly vested with formal and informal political powers to guarantee the stability of the political system.

In addition to the role of the head of state as a balancing factor, the eighteenth legislature also showed the growing relevance of the European Union, including for domestic policy decision-making – the third lesson that we can draw from our analysis. After years of growing criticism of, and opposition to, supranational institutions, characterized by a shift from the initial 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009) toward the increasingly complex workings of European governance, the Italian political system seems to have come to terms with the importance and centrality of the European anchoring, especially as a factor of institutional and democratic

stability. The EU has enabled Italy to include in its complex multilevel decision-making process even those actors – such as the Lega and FSM – that had initially placed themselves in an openly Euroskeptic position, transforming an opposition of principle to the EU polity into a critique of EU policies.

The Italian political system's ability to absorb challenges arising from the international context was further aided by transformations in the EU's own approach to economic policy. In contrast to the 2009 sovereign debt crisis, which was tackled by European institutions with policies of fiscal and social austerity, the approach shown in the aftermath of the pandemic emergency and the war in Ukraine was the opposite. On these occasions, the EU showed a willingness to create and share its own resources, finance investments, and even absorb debts incurred during the pandemic with innovative instruments. From this point of view, therefore, after the eighteenth legislature Italy's anchoring to the European Union is even firmer, and whatever government may come in the future, including a government dominated by 'sovereigntist or 'neo-nationalist' rhetoric, it will not be able to question this link.

Finally, the fourth and last lesson we can draw from such a 'critical legislature' concerns the long-lasting debate over the institutional transition that began in the Italian political system at the dawn of the 1990s in an attempt to transform a consociational democracy based on proportional representation into a Westminster-style, adversarial model of democratic government based on a quasi-majoritarian electoral system. A season of attempts at 'major reforms' (*grandi riforme*), that is, systemic interventions in the political regime and the distribution of powers between the central government and the regions, came definitely to an end during the eighteenth legislature. The only institutional reform that was approved during the period was the reduction (by one-third) of the number of parliamentarians of both chambers. This reform, as it was later realized, served more to give rhetorical answers to the anti-political sentiments of Italian society than to effectively improve the performance of the Italian political system. Thus, any hypothesis of comprehensive reform of the Italian institutional setting, capable of bringing the Italian transition to a conclusion, is now scarcely credible. At most, as observed at the opening of the current nineteenth legislature, sectoral or limited institutional reforms may be explored, with a piecemeal approach and with low or no level of systematicity. This is the case, for instance, of reforms granting 'differentiated autonomy' to the Regions or bestowing greater powers on the executive or the head of government/state.[2]

In any case, these reforms, however daring, will meet fierce opposition from all those that have come to appreciate the balancing effect of a political system that is held together by many checks and balances. Although some of these reforms might constitute a breakthrough in the long Italian institutional transition, they might not lead to desirable conclusions, not least because, as the events of the eighteenth legislature have well

[2] Naturally, it is still too early to evaluate the proposals for reforming the form of government put forward by the current executive led by Giorgia Meloni. However, both presidentialism and the so-called 'elective premiership' model (adopted only by Israel in the late 1990s and then quickly abandoned) do not seem to be able to solve the problems of the Italian political system, which concern political parties much more than political institutions. Moreover, both solutions would make the functioning of the political system more rigid, reducing that flexibility and room for manoeuver that has so far allowed the President of the Republic to effectively solve different crises and emerge from political deadlocks.

highlighted, the structural problems of the Italian political system (i.e., party fragmentation, ineffective decision-making, governmental instability) have more to do with the uncertain nature of the parties and the dismal condition of the party system rather than with the Italian institutional set-up. As long as no action is taken on the former, it will be difficult to achieve positive results on the latter. And in the meantime, the never-ending transition will continue to unfold, assuming anyone knows or remembers what the destination is.

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Party system change at the legislative level: evidence from the 18th Italian legislature

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Abstract

Party systems and party system change have long been one of the most studied topics within the comparative politics literature, yet most work in this field focuses on changes that occur between elections, neglecting the possibility that parties and party systems may reconfigure during the inter-election period. Building on the studies on party system change, this paper aims to analyse how individual changes in party affiliation can aggregate into changes at the level of parliamentary party system in the 18th Italian legislature. To achieve this goal, data on individual movements in the membership of parliamentary parties in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies are used to track the extent of legislative party system change over time, as indicated by changes in the number of relevant parties, their relative size and strength, and the bargaining power of parliamentary groups in the Italian parliament. Overall, our results show major changes in the main features of the Italian parliamentary party system and the structure of competition in the 18th legislature, returning the image of a fluid, unstable and constantly moving system.

1. Introduction

Political parties and party systems can be considered the pillars of democracy. On the one hand, according to the famous quotation of Schattschneider (1942), parties are a necessary condition for the very existence of democracy. Parties aggregate social interests and organise electoral competition; they guarantee the functioning of legislative assemblies, organising the agenda of parliaments and translating preferences into policies. Finally, parties form governments, whose survival depends on their support. On the other hand, party systems largely characterise the quality and functioning of democracy (Wolinetz 2006; Casal Bértoa 2017), as the number of individual parties and the way they interact and compete for electoral office and control of the government define voters' alternative choices and influence patterns of coalition formation and the survival of cabinets (Sartori 1976; Mair 1997, 2001, 2006).

Given the strong relationship between parties, party systems and the functioning of democracy, a substantial body of work within political science has been concerned with understanding what conditions influence the democratic process, both in terms of its legitimacy and effectiveness, identifying one of these conditions in party system institutionalisation (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Morlino 1998; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Lindberg 2007; Casal Bértoa and Mair 2012; Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016; Casal Bértoa 2017; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017, 2019; Emanuele and Chiaramonte

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2018). Moving from Sartori's (1976, 44) classic definition of a party system as 'the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition', Casal Bértoa (2017, 407) defined party system institutionalisation as 'the process by which the patterns of interaction among political parties become routine, predictable and stable over time'. According to this definition, institutionalisation is higher when parties compete in a structured and standardised way, thus reflecting a high level of 'systemness'. On the contrary, party systems are under-institutionalised when the patterns of interactions between parties are not predictable, revealing therefore an 'open' structure of competition. In other words, it is only when voters become accustomed to a certain set of political alternatives that a system becomes structured, which also implies that votes are channelled through the party rather than through personalistic leadership (Sartori 1994). In the absence of these conditions, there can be no structure in the party system. This line of reasoning also establishes a connection between institutionalisation and party system stability and change, identifying stability when there is a strong degree of institutionalisation and, conversely, change when there is a shift in the 'prevailing structure of competition' (Mair 2006, 66).

Although there is a broad agreement among scholars in the general definition of party system change, there is less consensus on how to identify it. These differences arise from how party systems are defined in the first place (for a review see Wolinetz 2006; Enyedi and Casal Bértoa 2020). On the one hand, comparative scholars have built classifications and typologies of party systems (Duverger 1954; Blondel 1968; Sartori 1976), developing criteria that have proven useful in categorising party systems 'into distinct classes or types, such as two-party systems, systems of moderate pluralism, multiparty systems, or whatever' (Mair 2006, p. 63). According to this approach, changes imply moving from one discrete category to another. On the other hand, party systems can be summarised by a number of distinct empirical indicators that allow party system change to be tracked as a continuous process (Wolinetz 2006). Finally, Mair (1997, 2001, 2006) emphasises the structure of competition for control of the executive as the key criterion for distinguishing party systems and therefore identifying party system change. Despite different approaches to defining party systems and analysing their changes, most scholars agree that the main characteristics of party systems derive almost exclusively from electoral competition, thus ignoring that, between elections, party systems can change due to party mergers, splits and individual party switching of Members of Parliament (MPs) (Heller and Mershon 2009).[1]

To balance the 'bias in favour of an elections-dominant understanding of what parties and party systems are and do' (Mershon and Shvetsova 2013, I), legislative party switching has recently become the subject of an expanding literature within political science. Scholarship studying defections has mainly focused on the factors that drive legislators to change their party affiliation and on the interplay between MPs' ambitions and institutions (Heller and Mershon 2005, 2008; Desposato 2006; McMenamin and Gwiazda 2011; Pinto 2015; Klein 2016, 2018, 2021; Volpi 2019). At the same time, scholars have started to investigate the implications of party switching for parties (Ceron and

[1] Focusing on the structure of competition for the executive, Mair (2006) implicitly acknowledged the electoral bias of most work on party system change (see Mershon and Shvetsova 2013, 7-8 for a discussion).

Volpi 2021, 2022) and more generally for party systems and party system change between elections (Mershon and Shvetsova 2008, 2013, 2014). This paper is intended to fit into the latter line of research, analysing how individual changes in party affiliation can aggregate into changes at the level of the parliamentary party system. This contribution is therefore mainly empirical and aims to track the evolution of the Italian parliamentary party system during the 18th legislature (2018-2022). This legislature is the product of the electoral success of two different populist parties - the League and the M5S - whose fortunes are linked to the multiple crises (political, economic and migratory) that have shaken Italy (and Europe) in recent years (Caiani and Padoan 2021). It is therefore a case worth studying through the lens of party switching, which is often perceived as a failure of democratic representation (Heller and Mershon 2009).

To achieve this goal, data on individual movements in the membership of parliamentary parties in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies are used to trace the extent of legislative party system change over time, as indicated by changes in the number of relevant parliamentary groups, their relative size and strength, and the general structure of competition in the Italian parliament. In addition, given the close relationship between stability, change and institutionalisation of party systems, this contribution also adapts two indices originally developed to measure the institutionalisation/de-institutionalisation of party systems in the electoral arena – the volatility and the degree of party system innovation (Powell and Tucker 2014; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017, 2019; Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2018) – to be applied in the legislative context. It should be emphasised that, by doing this, this paper does not intend to equate party system change and legislative party system change as two identical concepts. Rather, the aim of this work is to provide more insights into the study of party system change by analysing one single dimension of this broader phenomenon, namely the evolution of legislative parties between elections as a consequence of party switching.[2] Hence, it cannot say anything about patterns of party competition as it is more commonly understood, i.e. outside parliament through electoral competition and parties' supply-side strategies. Overall, quantitative indicators show significant changes in the main features of the Italian parliamentary party system and the structure of competition in the 18th legislature, returning the image of a fluid, unstable and constantly moving system.

The argument and evidence presented in this paper are structured as follows. After this introduction, the next section offers a brief review of the main approaches to the study of party system and party system change. The third section provides evidence on inter-electoral change in legislative party membership in the Italian parliament. In the fourth section, the main indicators to track the degree of parliamentary party system change are presented and their results are discussed, illustrating whether the changes identified by the quantitative indicators are also reflected in changes in the prevailing structure of competition in the lower and upper chambers. Finally, the implications for the analysis of the Italian case and more generally for a better understanding of party system change are discussed in the concluding section.

[2] In the paper, legislative party and parliamentary group are used as synonyms, in the knowledge that the party in public office represents only one 'face' of the broader concept that is the party, together with the party on the ground and the party in central office (Katz and Mair 1993).

2. Party systems and party system change: a brief review

Starting with the seminal work of Sartori (1976, 44), a party system has been conceptualised as the product of regular and recurring interactions among its constituent parties deriving from inter-party competition (see also Wolinetz 2006, 52). The type and quality of these interactions depend on various features which account for the variance observed across different party systems. These features typically include: the number of relevant parties contesting elections and winning offices, their size and relative strength both in terms of votes and seats, the number and the content of the policy dimensions that shape the space of political competition and, finally, parties' policy preferences and the distances that separate them on the most salient dimensions of competition. Other features on which party systems may differ are related to the level of institutionalisation or de-institutionalisation of the party system itself. This also implies considering the stability or instability of the patterns of parties' electoral support and the entry of new parties into the competition (Casal Bértoa 2017; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017, 2019; Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2018).

In order to grasp the differences between the various party systems, prominent scholars such as Duverger (1954), Blodel (1968) and Sartori (1976) have combined one or more of the above characteristics to construct typologies. However, while these criteria have proved useful in classifying party systems into specific types, they prove rather ineffective in capturing changes in party systems over time (Mair 2006, 63). On the other hand, a second approach to the study of party systems has completely avoided the issue of classification, instead using empirical indicators to summarise the main characteristics of party systems and show how they vary over time and space.

In the panorama of the studies on party systems and party system change, Mair (1997, 2001, 2006) stands out for challenging both those who resort to discrete categories to define party systems and those who use quantitative indicators to summarise the properties of such systems. According to Mair, quantitative indicators only matter if they affect the structure of competition for control of the executive, which he considers the core of any party system and the only criterion for identifying party system change. More precisely, Mair defines party competition for the executive in terms of three factors: the degree of alternation in office, the stability of government alternatives over time, and, finally, the extent to which access to government is open to new parties. The combination of these elements makes it possible to classify party systems as closed or open structures of competition for the executive and, consequently, to define party system change when there is a change in the prevailing structure of competition.

Building on these insights, in this paper we address the phenomenon of party system change by focusing on a specific dimension that has usually been ignored in the comparative literature, namely the evolution of legislative parties as a consequence of party switching.

3. Party switching in the 18th legislature

Defined as an umbrella label for any registered change in party affiliation by elected politicians (Heller and Mershon 2009, 10), party switching encompasses different phenomena involving varying degrees of coordination between legislators: party

mergers, splits and individual 'jumps' of MPs from one party to another (Ceron 2013; Golder et al. 2022). Building on the Müller and Strøm (1999) classification of political goals, a first strand of literature has shown that Members of Parliament (MPs) may change party affiliation to secure re-election, obtain office benefits and influence policies (Heller and Mershon 2005, 2008; Desposato 2006; McMenamin and Gwiazda 2011). A second strand of literature has focused instead on how the utility of promoting MPs' electoral, office and policy benefits can vary according to electoral institutions (Klein 2016, 2018), the level of institutionalization of the party system (Klein 2021), and parties' ideology (Volpi 2019). Finally, a third strand of literature has concentrated more on the implications of party switching for sending and receiving parties (Ceron and Volpi 2021, 2022) and for party systems, party system change, and the structure of competition between elections (Mershon and Shvetsova 2008, 2013, 2014). More generally, the study of defections can provide insights into party system change and the dynamics of political competition in the inter-electoral period (Laver and Benoit 2003; Laver 2005), also offering a new understanding of political parties as clusters of legislators rather than as unitary actors (Benoit and Giannetti 2009; Ceron 2016). This work positions itself in this latter line of research, focusing not so much on the factors that drive individual party switching, but on the implications of defections for party system change between elections.

Although legislators are supposed to remain loyal to their party for the duration of the entire legislature, this is far from being completely true. Comparative data show that party switching is quite a common phenomenon in legislatures around the world (see O'Brien and Shomer 2013; Volpi 2019; Klein 2021, for data on defections measured at the party-level). These data show that both in Western Europe and in the younger democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, the relevance of party switching varies greatly between countries, both in terms of the number of legislators involved and the number of parties affected by some defection. The main point that emerges when comparing the two groups of countries is certainly the greater recurrence of the phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe in the period following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Sbabad and Slomczynski 2004; McMenamin and Gwiazda 2011). In the group of Western European countries, however, Italy emerges as a deviant case due to the remarkable number of defections that have been registered in the last few years. Given this uniqueness, the Italian parliament has come to be one of the most studied cases within the empirical literature on party switching, especially since 1993, when the composition and labels of legislative parties became increasingly unstable following the passage from the so-called First to Second Republic (Verzichelli 1996; Heller and Mershon 2005, 2008; Giannetti, Di Virgilio and Pinto 2012; Russo, Tronconi and Verzichelli 2014; Valbruzzi 2014; Pinto 2015, 2021).

Our data confirm the trends registered by previous empirical research and update the analysis to the 18th Italian legislature, also extending the investigation to the Senate between 2018 and 2022.[3] Following the definition of party switching presented above, we

[3] Most of the studies on party switching in Italy are focused on the Chamber of Deputies, probably in the belief that the Senate repeats the patterns observed for the lower chamber. It should be noted, however, that a number of studies have registered a growing incongruence in the distribution of seats between the two assemblies (Pedrazzani 2017; Giannetti, Pedrazzani e Pinto 2020). Moreover, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate differ according to the Rules of Procedures, in particular in relation to the norms regulating party switching and the formation of new parliamentary groups (Pedrazzani and Zucchini 2020).

register as a defection event any recorded change in party affiliation on the part of MPs, as reported in the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate.[4] Table 1 provides all the relevant information about party switching in the two chambers under examination, including the period of observation, the number of MPs, the number of switching events, the number of unique switchers, the incidence of party switching in relation to the entire population of MPs, and finally the percentage of defectors with respect to the total number of legislators. These last two figures are useful for comparing the switching behaviour in the lower and upper chambers, as the former comprises twice as many MPs as the latter.

Table 1. Summary data on party switching in the Italian Chamber of deputies and the Senate (18th legislature)

	Chamber	Senate
Start	2018-03-27	2018-03-27
Stop	2022-02-09	2022-09-02
Days	1620	1620
Months	53	53
MPs	660	334
Switches	294	147
Switchers	215	87
Switches/MPs (%)	44.54	44.01
Switchers/MPs (%)	32.57	26.04

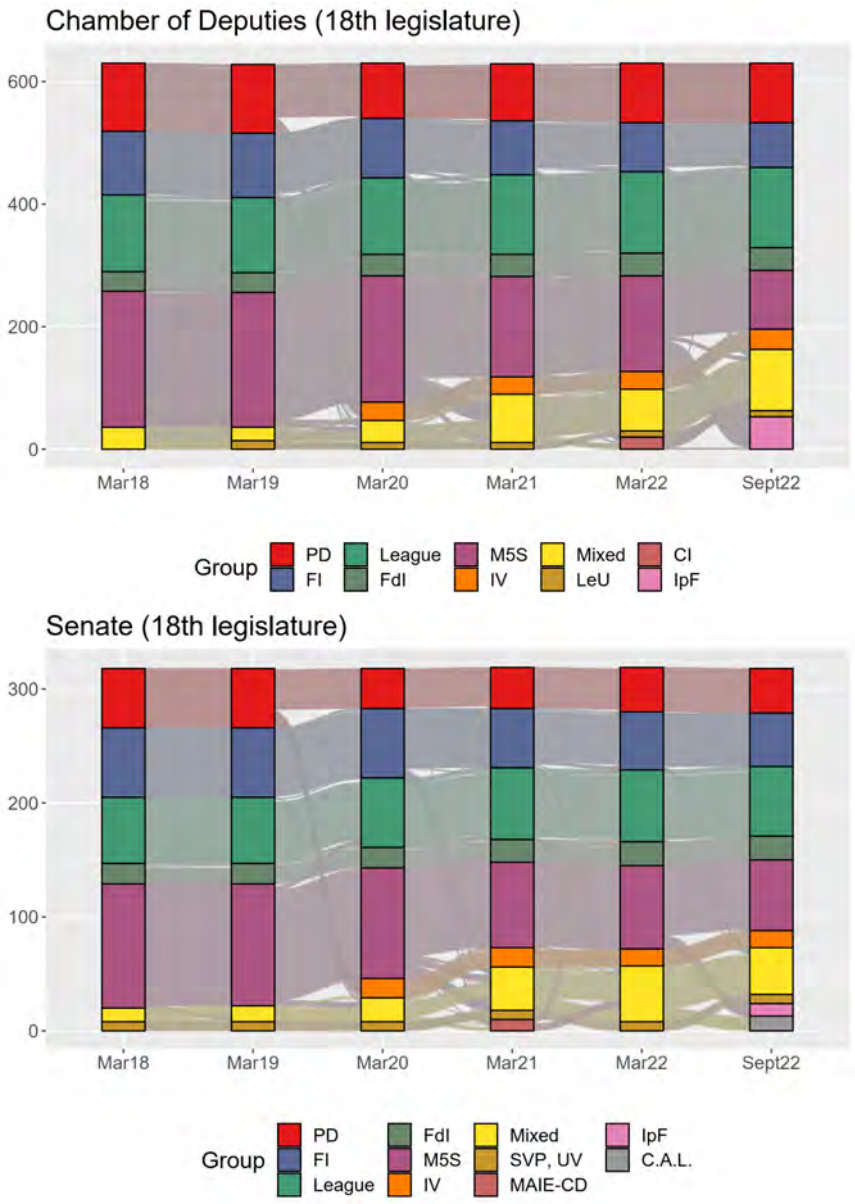
Notes: the number of MPs includes all legislators who held a seat during the legislature including those who resigned or died and those who took over. For the Senate, also life senators are included. Both legislatures are still running with the end scheduled after the national elections on 25 September 2022.
Source: own elaboration on the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

Table 1 shows that the absolute number of defections in the Chamber is double that in the Senate (294 vs. 147). However, taking into account that the lower house includes far more legislators than the upper chamber, the incidence of the phenomenon is more or less the same: 44.54 percent for the Chamber of Deputies and 44.01 percent for the Senate. This result is quite surprising as the Senate introduced a reform of the Rules of Procedures in 2017, with new regulations aimed at reducing the formation of new parliamentary groups during the legislature, which should also have had an impact on party switching. Although a rigorous test to study the impact of these new rules on party switching is beyond the scope of this paper, data seem to suggest that this reform was ineffective. The main difference between the two assemblies is in the percentage of unique switchers, which is higher in the Chamber. This means that in the Senate, a

[4] Raw data on the movements between parliamentary groups can be retrieved from https://dati.camera.it/it/ and https://dati.senato.it/sito/home. These data record all the changes occurring in the composition of parliamentary groups in the two chambers starting from the first day of the legislature (27-3-18), without distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary defections. At the time of writing this paper, the legislature has not yet ended (general elections are scheduled for 25-9-22). For this reason, we have arbitrarily retrieved data up to 2-9-22. We cannot exclude further defections before the end of the legislature.

smaller group of senators – about a quarter – are responsible for the total number of defections, changing party affiliation several times during the legislature. In the Chamber, on the other hand, the phenomenon is more widespread, involving almost a third of MPs.

Figure 1. Alluvial plots of party switching in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (18th legislature)



Notes: PD: Democratic Party; FI: Go Italy; League: League; FdI: Brothers of Italy; M5S: Five Star Movement; IV: Italy Alive; Mixed: Mixed Group; LeU: Free and Equal; CI: Cheer up Italy; SVP, UV: South Tyrol Peoples Party, Valdotanian Union; MAIE-CD: Associative Movement of Italians Abroad-Democratic Centre; C.A.L.: Constitution, Environment, Labour; IpF: Together for the Future.
Source: own elaboration on the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

A clearer picture of the dynamics of party switching in the 18th legislature is provided by Figure 1, which employs alluvial plots to show switching flows during the legislature. This picture can be useful to get a first idea of how the occurrence of the

phenomenon reshaped the parliamentary party system between 2018 and 2022. Columns represents the distribution of legislators in the different parliamentary groups observed at a yearly base, starting from the first day of the legislature. Flows show how MPs regroup in parliamentary parties from year to year. Thicker flows identify party splits, while thinner flows identify individual 'jumps'.

Figure 1 identifies three common trends shared by both chambers. Firstly, the first year of the legislature is characterised by a very low level of defections, which instead increases from the second year onwards. Second, the size of the mixed group – which by definition is characterised by low levels of unity and party discipline and therefore can constitute a potential problem for the proper functioning of the assemblies – grows throughout the years. Third, there is an increase in fragmentation due to the emergence of new parliamentary groups during the legislature. If we take the parliamentary party system in place at the beginning of the legislature as a reference point, Figure 1 provides initial evidence of its evolution and, consequently, of a change in its structure. In the next section, we will investigate these changes in a more systematic way using a series of indicators to summarise them.

4. Legislative party system change in the 18th legislature

As mentioned above, one approach to the study of party systems relies on quantitative indicators to summarise the main characteristics of party systems and track changes in party systems over time. A second approach focuses more on changes in the structure of competition for control of the executive as an indicator of change in the party system. In this section, we first present and discuss the main indicators for tracking the degree of change in the parliamentary party system during the 18th parliamentary term. Then, we will test whether the changes revealed by these indicators have an impact on the prevailing structure of the competition in the lower and upper chambers.

4.1. Quantitative indicators of party system change

As a first step in our analysis of parliamentary party system change, we rely on four indicators, most of them adapted from the literature on party systems and party system change in the electoral context: the effective number of parliamentary parties, within-term seat volatility, the size of new parliamentary party groups, and, finally, the size of the mixed group. All the indicators are based on the relative strength of parliamentary parties. Although important, the size of parties is only one of the criteria for studying party systems. Other important aspects are the ideological preferences of parties and the number of salient dimensions of competition (Wolinetz 2006). Unfortunately, the main methodologies for studying parties' policy preferences – the expert survey and the content analysis of parties' manifestos (Budge et al. 2001; Benoit and Laver 2006) – do not allow us to track the evolution of parties' ideal points and salient dimensions during the legislative term.[5] For this reason we exclude in our analysis any consideration related to the spatial structure of the space of competition.[6] All indicators are measured on a daily

[5] Both expert surveys and the analysis of party manifestos calculate party policy positions at fixed points in time, which usually correspond to elections (see Budge et al. 2001; Benoit and Laver 2006).
[6] For an account of party system change in Italy from the perspective of the spatial approach to elections and party competition, see Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto (2017, 2022).

basis. This choice makes it possible to trace specific events that can be linked to the recorded changes. In addition, daily measurements can form the basis for further aggregations.

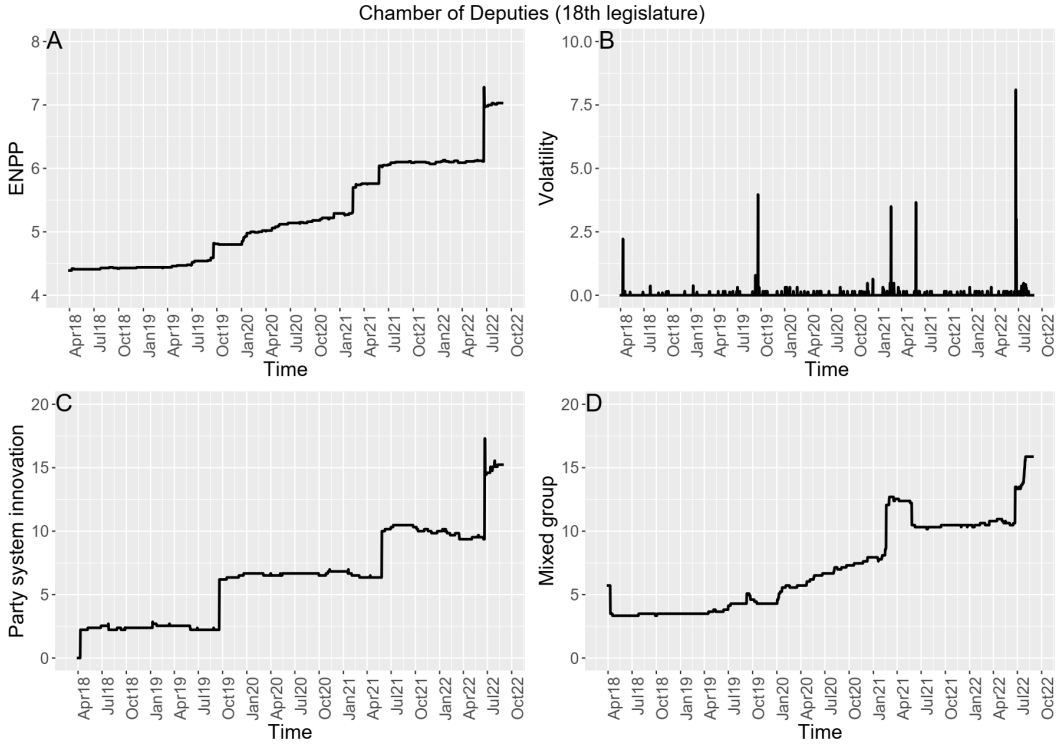
A first indicator we use in our study concerns the number of competing parties in a system. Counting the number of relevant parties has always been an issue debated in the literature on party systems and party system changes (Blondel 1968; Sartori 1976; Siaroff 2000). A standard method for counting parties that avoids discretionary decisions is the Laakso and Taagepera (1979) index of effective number of parties. The index is measured by dividing one by the sum of the squares of proportions of votes (effective number of electoral parties, ENEP) or seats (effective number of parliamentary parties, ENPP) won by each party competing in the system. Given our focus on the evolution of the parliamentary party system, we use this latest version of the index, measuring the ENPP per day, starting from the first day of the 18th legislature until the last one of the observation periods.

A second indicator used in our analysis to track the changes in the party system over the inter-election period is a measure of volatility. The phenomenon of volatility is conceptually related to the stability or instability of voting behaviour patterns and is measured by averaging the vote shifts between parties in two successive elections (Pedersen 1979).[7] For the purpose of our study, we use a measure of within-term volatility which averages shifts in party seat shares from one day to the next (Mershon and Shvetsova 2013). Volatility is the product of two different trends: the first one is when voters switch their vote between existing parties (type B volatility or 'alternation'); the second one occurs when voters shift their vote from existing parties to new ones (type A volatility or 'regeneration') (Powell and Tucker 2014; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017, 2019). While these two types of volatility have different implications in electoral contexts, this distinction is less relevant in the legislative context, as both are indicators of instability in the structure of parliamentary party competition. For this reason, in the subsequent pages we focus our attention on total within-term volatility.

Finally, to complete our analysis of party system change between elections, we employ two further indicators. The first is a measure of the degree of 'newness' in the parliamentary party system and is calculated as the share of seats held by parliamentary groups that were formed after the first day of the legislature (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2018). As the emergence of new parties can make inter-party competition increasingly unstable and unpredictable, party system innovation has often been used as an indicator of party system change (Casal Bértoa 2017). The second measure tracks the share of seats held by the mixed group. Given the fundamental importance of party unity in legislative voting, the size of the mixed group, which is by definition heterogeneous and not very cohesive, increases unpredictability in parliamentary decision-making. Both indicators capture relevant aspects of the changing structure of party competition in the legislature. The trends identified by the four measures of party system change in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are illustrated by Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

[7] Wolinetz (2006, 60) contests the use of volatility as an indicator of party system change or de-institutionalisation, as it measures 'the ability of parties to build loyal followings and collectively structure the electorate', which 'are properties of parties, individually and collectively, rather than aspects of the party system'. Despite this, volatility has been widely used to measure the regeneration and de-institutionalisation of party systems (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017, 2019).

Figure 2. Indicators of party system change in the Chamber of Deputies (18th legislature)

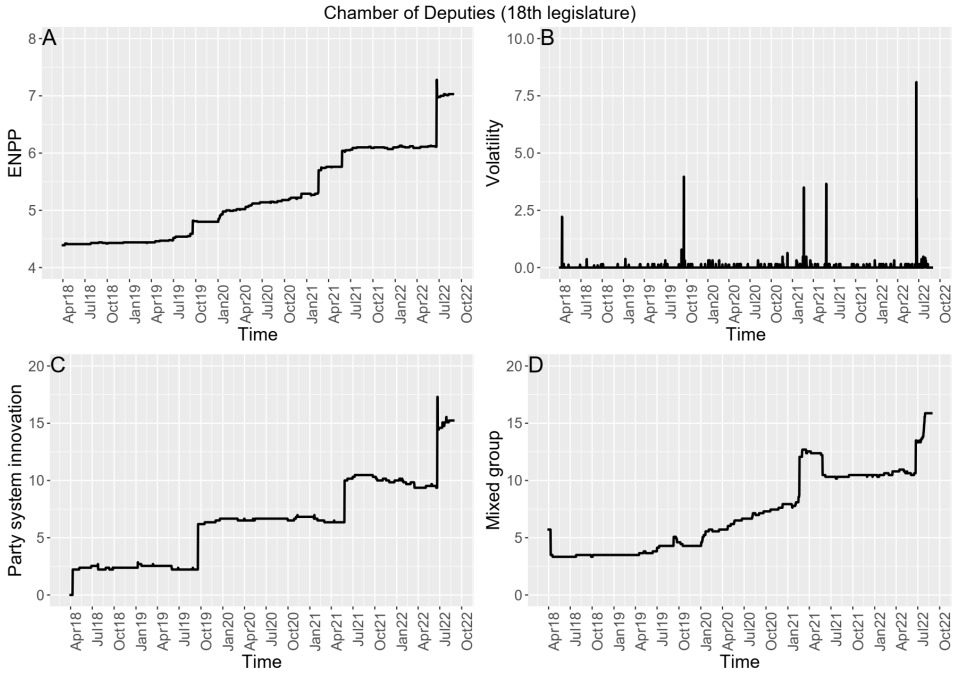


Notes: in Panel A, the Y-axis measures the effective number of parliamentary parties; in Panel B, the percentage of seats shifted between party groups from one day to the next; in Panel C, the percentage of seats held by new parties formed during legislature; in Panel D, the percentage of seats held by the mixed group. Data refer to the Chamber of Deputies.
Source: own elaboration on the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

Figures 2 and 3 show that in both the assemblies, the ENPP almost doubles during the legislative term (Panel A). On the first day of the legislature, the ENPP was 4.39 in the House and 4.48 in the Senate; on the last day of the observation period, these figures rose to 7.03 and 7.23 respectively. This is a relevant increase which, using Siaroff's classification (2000) of party systems, can be interpreted in substantial terms as a shift from a case of extreme multipartitism with two dominant players – the M5S and the League which together hold more than 50 percent of the seats – to a case of extreme multipartitism with a greater balance between parties, as the seats controlled by the M5S and the League fell to about 35 percent. The observed trends in the within-term volatility provide further evidence in favour of party system change in the 18th legislature (Panel B). Both figures show a fairly constant rate of volatility calculated on a daily basis, punctuated by more consistent peaks of over 8 percent in the case of the Chamber and 4 percent for the Senate. The average volatility each year is about 12 and 31 percent for the lower and the upper houses respectively, figures that analysists of volatility in the electoral context would consider high (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017). Moving to our third indicator, party system innovation offers information about the regeneration of the parliamentary party system (Panel C). In both the assemblies, the share of seats held by groups formed after the first day of the legislature increases over time, rising in the Chamber from less than 4 percent to more than 15 at the end of the observation period. Similarly, in the Senate there is a shift from less than 2 to more than 12 percent. Finally, comparably to what

we observe for party system innovation, in both assemblies, the size and weight of the mixed group grow over time (Panel D), exceeding 12 percent of the seats: on the last day of the observation period, the mixed group is the second largest group in the Chamber and the fourth in the Senate.

Figure 3. Indicators of party system change in the Senate (18th legislature)



Notes: in Panel A, the Y-axis measures the effective number of parliamentary parties; in Panel B, the percentage of seats shifted between party groups from one day to the next one; in Panel C, the percentage of seats held by new parties formed during legislature; in Panel D, the percentage of seats held by the mixed group. Data refer to the Senate.
Source: own elaboration on the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

Overall, the four indicators provide evidence in support of party system change during the 18th legislature. The data show that, after about a year of relative stability in the parliamentary party system, the environment started to become more dynamic, in particular from the second half of 2019, coinciding with the dissolution of the Conte I government and the formation of the second cabinet led by Giuseppe Conte.

4.2. Changes in the structure of competition

As a second step in our analysis, we shift our attention to the three governments formed during the 18th legislature, to see whether the changes in the number of parties and the degree of party system innovation detected above had an impact on the competition for the executive. To this purpose, Table 2 reports information on the composition of the governments, together with data on the extent of the support for governments during the confidence vote given by new parties and the mixed group.

Table 2. Governments in the 18th legislature

	Term	Members	Support

Conte I	2018-06-01 – 2019-08-20 (445 days)	M5S-League	1.71
Conte II	2019-09-05 – 2021-01-26 (509 days)	M5S-PD-LeU-IV	13.70
Draghi	2021-02-13 – 2022-07-21 (523 days)	M5S-PD-LeU-IV-League-FI-IpF	15.63

Notes: membership refers to parties with at least one minister or deputy minister at the time of the end of the government. 'Support' reports data on the percentage of deputies belonging to new groups or to the mixed group who voted in favour of the government over the total votes of confidence in favour of the government. In bold the new groups formed during the legislature. Acronyms: M5S: Five Star Movement; League: League; PD: Democratic Party; LeU: Free and Equal; IV: Italy Alive; FI: Go Italy; IpF: Together for the Future.
Source: data adapted from ParlGov (Döring, Huber and Manow 2022) and own elaboration on the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

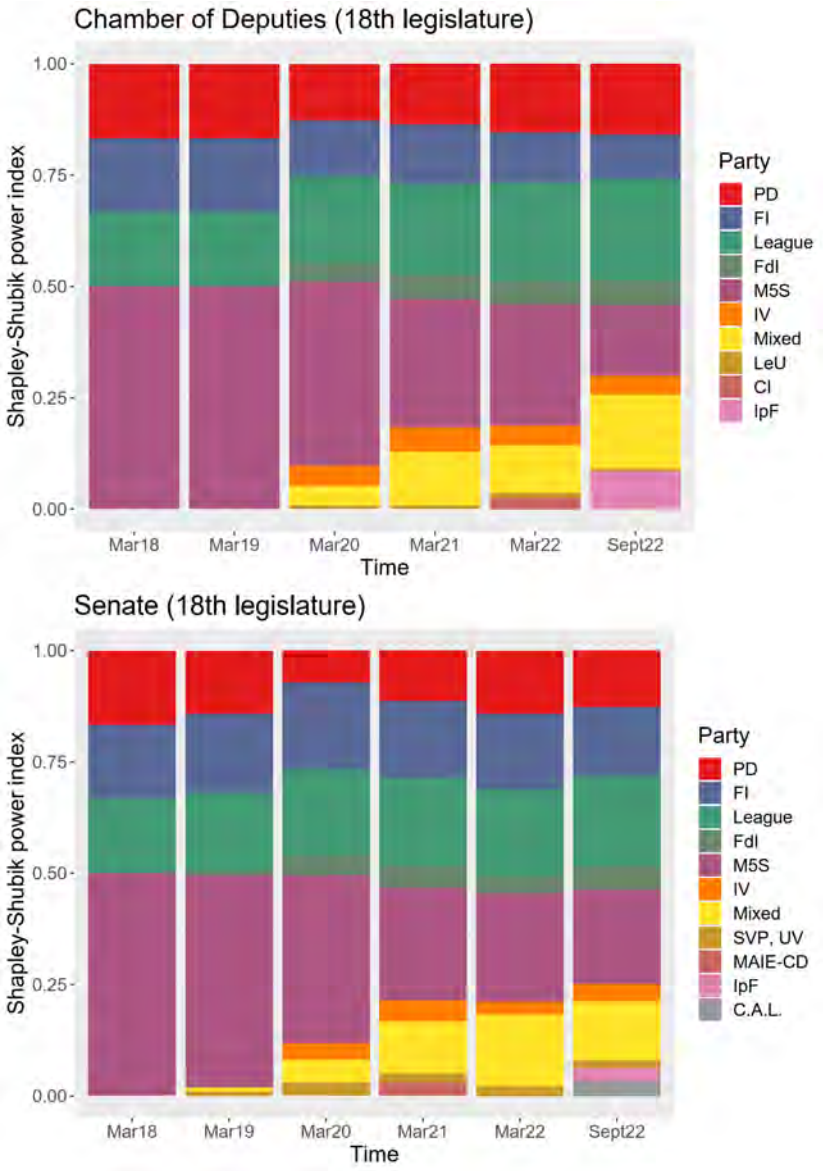
Table 2 shows that the two inter-electoral governments following the first cabinet led by Conte are based either on a reshuffling of the original coalition, with the PD replacing the League as the main partner of the M5S in the Conte II government, or on the incorporation of additional parties into the pre-existing alliance, in particular the centre-right League and FI, in the executive headed by Mario Draghi. We observe, therefore, a high degree of alternation and instability in the government formula. Moreover, both the Conte II and the Draghi governments include new parliamentary parties created during the legislature, showing that the competition for the executive is open to brand new parliamentary groups. In particular, the second government headed by Conte incorporates IV, a splinter of the PD.[8] Further information on the evolution of competition for the executive is provided by the last column of Table 2, which shows the percentage of confidence votes given by new groups and the mixed group in support of the governments over the total number of favourable votes. While out of 350 votes in favour of the Conte I government in the Chamber of Deputies, only six came from the mixed group or new parties (1.71 percent), in the Conte II and Draghi governments this number rises considerably (13.70 and 15.63 percent respectively). Considering that the mixed group includes independents and small party labels that do not reach the threshold necessary to form a parliamentary group, these figures indicate that an increasing share of support for the governments comes from components that are ideologically heterogeneous and poorly disciplined by definition. Overall, this brief analysis configures the Italian parliamentary party system of the 18th legislature as highly unstructured, with unpredictable patterns of competition.

An alternative and more elegant way to summarise how the structure of the competition for the executive evolved during the 18th legislature is provided by Figure 4, which shows the distribution of the Shapley-Shubik (1954) power index among the parliamentary parties in the Chamber and the Senate, calculated at the beginning of the legislature and then after each year. The Shapley-Shubik index is an index of bargaining expectations in an office-seeking coalition system as it measures the power of a given party in coalition bargaining, based on the probability that the party can turn a winning coalition

[8] According to our coding also LeU can be classified as a new parliamentary group since it was created in April 2018 only in the Chamber of Deputies. However, this group had existed since the beginning of the legislature as part of the mixed group. IpF instead can be considered a new party; however, it is very residual in terms of the period of the Draghi cabinet covered.

into a losing one (Laver and Benoit 2003, 217). Thus, the more likely a party is to play a pivotal role in the government formation process, the more power it will have in coalition bargaining and the higher the power index will be. The index is computed on the basis of the seats controlled by each party and varies between 0 and 1. It can be interpreted as the proportion of all potential coalitions in which a party is pivotal. The sum of the powers of all parties is always equal to 1.

Figure 4. Shapley-Shubik power index in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (18th legislature)



Notes: PD: Democratic Party; FI: Go Italy; League: League; FdI: Brothers of Italy; M5S: Five Star Movement; IV: Italy Alive; Mixed: Mixed Group; LeU: Free and Equal; CI: Cheer up Italy; SVP, UV: South Tyrol Peoples Party, Valdotanian Union; MAIE-CD: Associative Movement of Italians Abroad-Democratic Centre; C.A.L.: Constitution, Environment, Labour; IpF: Together for the Future.
Source: own elaboration on the Open Data of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

Figure 4 shows that at the beginning of the legislature, the M5S is the most 'powerful' actor in both the Chamber and the Senate. With a power index of 0.5, the M5S is

expected to be decisive in half of all potential coalitions. The League, the PD and the FI, independently from the seats they control, have an index of 0.17, capturing their minor strategic importance in the competition for the executive. All other parliamentary groups are not relevant at all, having an index of 0. After the first year of the legislature, the balance of power between parties begins to change. Starting from the second year, the strategic power of the M5S gradually diminishes, while that of the other groups – in particular the League – increases over time. At the end of the observation period, the League is the most decisive party in the Chamber, with an index of 0.23. Following numerous defections to the mixed group, the latter became the second most powerful actor (0.17). The M5S ranks only third along with the PD (0.16). In contrast, in the Senate, the M5S is still the most powerful party (0.21), but with an index that is less than half of what it was at the start of the legislature. In conclusion, our analysis reveals that over the course of the legislature, the structure of the competition changed drastically, becoming more open and less predictable.

5. Conclusions

Party systems and party system change have long been one of the most studied topics within the comparative politics literature, yet most work in this field focuses on changes that occur between elections, overlooking the possibility that parties and party systems may reconfigure during the inter-election period. This paper explores a specific dimension of the broader phenomenon of party system change, namely the evolution of legislative party system in the Italian Parliament between 2018 and 2022. The configuration of parliaments is usually considered rather stable: elections allocate seats and define the balance of power between parties until the next election. However, individual party switching can subtly alter this configuration, to the point of changing the bargaining power of parliamentary groups and support for government policy through parliamentary voting. According to the analysis presented in this paper, this is exactly what happened in Italy during the 18th legislature. An impressive number of defections in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, despite the fact that the latter had implemented anti-defection rules, led to significant changes in the relative strength of parliamentary party groups and in the number of parties, followed by the entry of new political formations in parliamentary arena. These changes contributed to transforming the structure of competition in parliament, which proved to be open and unstable, with patterns of inter-party relations that can hardly be predictable.

Our findings have two major implications. The first challenges the value of elections as a mechanism for holding governments accountable and ensuring that citizens' views and interests are adequately represented in the democratic process. It seems clear from our analysis that elections do not define the structure of party competition once and for all, but, if anything, they are only an intermediate step in a broader process in which the main actors – parties and individual legislators – continually review and adapt their position. The second implication concerns the functioning of parliaments. Institutionalisation is usually associated with strong institutions. Therefore, the instability and unpredictability of the structure of party competition detected for the Italian parliament contribute to undermining its role vis-à-vis the government, further fuelling a crisis of political representation.

More generally, this work shows that inter-electoral politics is important. Future research should therefore extend the analysis to previous legislatures in order to verify whether the changes in the parliamentary party system noted for the 18th legislature are an isolated case or are instead the rule. Secondly, although our analysis offers an original perspective on the topic of party system change, it is limited to the evolution of legislative party system in the parliamentary arena. As repeatedly emphasised above, this constitutes only one dimension of a broader phenomenon which is commonly understood through electoral competition. This is the reason why future research should better explore the link between party system change in the electoral and parliamentary contexts, in order to investigate whether the two are in any way related. In addition to being a study of only one legislative term, this work is also limited by the fact that it ignores changes in parties' policy preferences over time, which are an important element of party systems. Consequently, future empirical works should overcome current limitations, developing techniques, such as the content analysis of parliamentary debates, to track the evolution of policy preferences during legislatures.

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The Italian space of electoral competition in pandemic times

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Abstract

The polls on the voting intentions of Italians during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed substantial stability of electoral orientations in the first phase of the pandemic, while they detected a certain fluidity after the birth of the Draghi government, specifically with a decline of the League and M5s and the growth of Brothers of Italy (FdI). The results of the 2022 general election confirmed those trends with a clear-cut victory of the (centre-) right coalition, this time led by Meloni's Brothers of Italy. In the meantime, the opponents experienced a poor electoral performance, and an even more deceiving result in terms of seats. All these upheavals have led many pundits to speculate about what would have been the results if the opponents to the right-wing coalition would have succeeded in building a coalition to achieve a higher level of competitiveness in the first-past-the-post electoral districts. But, beyond considerations based on vote intentions or electoral results, to what extent are these speculations consistent with the actual space of electoral competition among main Italian parties? In other words, on which areas of the electoral space does the competition unfold and how did those areas evolve? This article answers these questions using original survey data from the ResPOnsE COVID-19 project. In particular, through the scale analysis of a set of propensity-to-vote (PTV) measures, we investigate the configuration of the electoral competition space in the aftermath of 2022 general election and how (and if) this configuration changes over three distinct phases of the pandemic: during the first wave (spring-summer 2020), during the third wave (spring 2021) and during the fourth wave (autumn-winter 2021). Results show that regardless of the period analysed, party competition occurs mainly within the right, whose party electorates strongly overlap, whereas more barriers exist among party electorates of the opposite camp.

1. Introduction

To any observer of the Italian political debate, the attention journalists, politicians and pundits pay to election polls is manifest, with a special focus on the estimates coming from the aggregation of the answers to the question on vote intention. Despite the notable limitations of such predictive exercises, nowadays broadly recognised in literature (Sturgis et al. 2018), their popularity in the public debate is paramount, not only before an election but also after it and during the whole electoral cycle.

If predicting the share of votes of the parties is thus problematic, there is something that is even more arduous if not altogether impossible to achieve by means of vote intention questions. In fact, relying only on them does not allow us to derive direct information on party competition.

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The scope of this article is firstly to illustrate the main limitations of vote intentions as an instrument for describing both proportion of votes and party competition. Secondly, we will discuss an alternative to vote intention that supplies a broader reach, especially as far as the description of the political space of competition is concerned. We refer to propensity to vote (PTV) measures, illustrating their conceptual significance and how they work. Finally, we use PTV to reconstruct the space of competition in the last two years, from the beginning of the pandemic crisis to the general election of 2022.

The sections of the article follow this scheme closely, with the addition, after the conceptual discussion of PTVs, of a brief presentation of the data that we use.

2. Vote intentions and their limitations in studying electoral competition

The primary use of vote intentions within the framework of electoral polls is to generate a prediction of a forthcoming election. However, in recent years, their use became widespread during the whole course of the electoral cycle. It is now customary to have weekly polls and to follow their trend over time. Gathering multiple polls and offering an average for comparison over time also in periods not close to an election has become common practice.[1]

The attitudes towards this instrument are nonetheless ambivalent. Their limitations are, in principle, acknowledged, but in facts they are commented on 'as if' they would depict the state of the matter about the preferences of the voters, often having real consequences on the decisions of political actors.

Nowadays, a great deal is known about the shortcoming of electoral forecasts based on polls, especially when far from elections (Sturgis et al. 2018). It is nonetheless useful to briefly review the main limitations that affect specifically the vote intention question.

The first problem is that a large portion of respondents, generally exceeding a third, do not answer the question, either because they do not know or because they do not want to express their preference. This points to a clear problem of coverage, made more severe by the fact that refusing to express one's vote intention is often not independent of the respondent's political profile. In fact, respondents giving a valid answer are more politically interested and engaged than those refusing to answer such a question. And this can significantly bias the estimates.

Problems concerning both coverage and measurement error are not the only ones affecting the instrument. There is also a more profound problem connected with it. The main limitation is in fact conceptual. The question gives the interviewee the possibility to choose only one party from a list, while it supplies no information about the attitudes of the respondent towards all other non-selected parties.

One could hold that the information we want to know is about the party to be voted for, and thus that is what we ask. If we constrain ourselves to this use, we can hold that the instrument supplies a valid measurement of what it purports to measure (Kelley 1927, quoted in Borsboom 2005, p. 150). It is, though, fair to recognize that such a question does not allow anything to be said about the preferences concerning parties other

[1] The main example in Europe, collecting polls in multiple countries, is Poll of Polls produced by the online outlet politico.eu (https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/).

than the one selected, and therefore on the competition that exists between parties and the contestable nature of portions of the electorate.[2]

This limitation is often forgotten and many arguments on the possible electoral gains and losses of parties are in fact derived from the comparison of mere marginal distributions of the vote intention question.

In the face of these shortcomings and holding that understanding party competition is a relevant objective, the question is: does a viable alternative to vote intention exist? The answer is, in our opinion, positive.

3. The alternative to vote intentions: propensity to vote

For four decades now, political scientists developed a tool for studying voters' preferences that is referred to as propensity to vote for a party, and denoted by the acronym PTV (Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Van der Eijk et al. 2006).

PTVs are measured by asking the respondents how likely they are to vote for a party in the future, on a scale from 'not at all likely' to 'very likely'. Crucially, all major parties are tested, supplying a measure of the dyadic relation, in terms of probability to vote, that exists between them and each respondent.

Propensities to vote are regularly asked in the questionnaire of the European Election Study (EES) which supplies the standard formulation of the question:

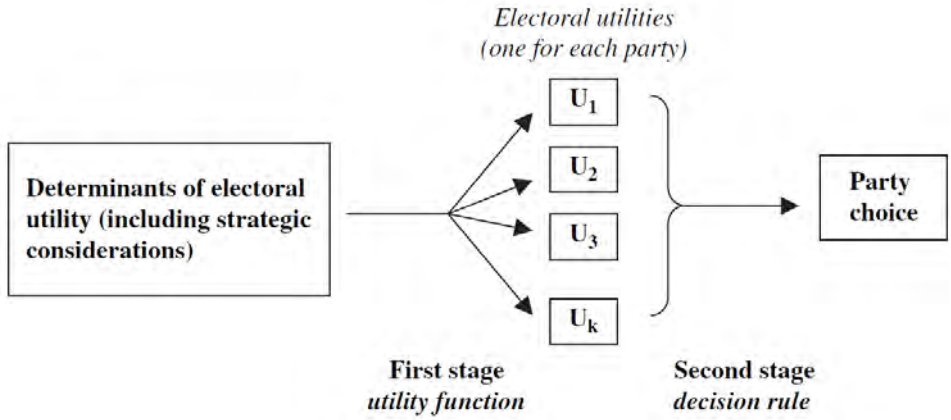
> "We have a number of parties in [country] each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please answer on a scale where 0 means 'not at all probable' and 10 means 'very probable' (Schmitt et al. 2022).

The concept of propensity to vote is not particularly complex to imagine. Indeed, it corresponds to the evaluation that a voter gives of a party, in terms of willingness to vote for it in an undefined future. Economists would indicate it as the utility of the various voting options, which is made explicit and observable precisely through the answers to the question.

If the concept is simple to grasp, its conceptual implications are quite profound in terms of representation of the electoral choice process. In fact, considering the utility of the various choice options in the voting function means making clear the fact that the voting choice takes place in two steps. In the first step, the available options are considered, and a specific utility is attributed to each one (propensity to vote); in the second step, a translation rule is applied which leads from the utilities, considered together and compared, to a choice of a preferred option that is, in our case, vote intention. Figure 1 clearly represents this process.

[2] To fully understand this limitation, it is enough to refer to an example in market research. Assume that we want to study the pasta market. By asking only which brand of pasta a potential buyer would like to buy (purchasing intention), we would only know their preference for the pasta they choose, and nothing about all the other brands not chosen. It is clear that for an operator in the pasta sector this information would be rather poor and insufficient for designing a market strategy aimed at acquiring new customers, because no information on effective competition between brands would be available.

Figure 1. A two-stage model of electoral choice



Source: Van der Eijk et al. 2006, p. 428.

These propensities to vote, therefore, represent the immediate antecedents of the choice to vote, and summarize both individual considerations and the images of a party which lead a voter to be more inclined to choose one rather than another.

There is something more to the PTVs, a characteristic that clearly distinguishes them from voting intentions and on which their inventors insist. Voting propensities are not ipsative. The adjective 'ipsative' indicates a forced choice, where by choosing one option you give up the others, such as when you have to choose a party on the ballot paper. PTVs allow a probability to vote greater than zero to be expressed for several parties. In this way, it is possible to detect if a voter is available to more than one party and, therefore, to study the potential competition between these parties (for the linkage between electoral availability and political competition, see Bartolini 2000).

What is the typical distribution of the propensity to vote for a specific party? First, the majority of respondents usually indicate values equal to zero, expressing a total closure towards the party at stake. The other respondents are then distributed over the scale with increasing values, signalling a higher openness of considering the party as a vote option. Thus, the typical distribution of a PTV is skewed to right, with the modal value at zero.

When considering the joint distribution of PTV for more parties, we can obtain different profiles for our respondents. One can express a high score only for one party, supposedly being certain of her choice and not exposed to competition, while another can indicate two or more high PTVs.

Those respondents who assign high and equal or similar scores to two or more parties are voters who are potentially open to different options and, therefore, open to competition between parties (Bartolini 2000). On the one hand, PTVs are a straightforward instrument to detect the potential electorate of a party, namely those who express high scores for that party. On the other hand, they are an effective tool to study the structure of the electoral competition, and its evolution over time, precisely because they supply non-ipsative information for several parties.

There is a final attractive characteristic of PTVs with respect to voting intention: being a less directive question formulated in a non-ipsative way, it receives far fewer refusals and 'don't know' answers from the interviewees, allowing analyses to be

elaborated on almost the entirety of the sample (for an Italian example, see Vezzoni 2014).

Since their ideation in the 1980s, PTVs have proven to be very successful. First and foremost, they became a major tool to study electoral behaviour in comparative perspective (Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). In the American context, the combined use of PTVs for the Democratic and Republican parties provides a better measure of party identification than the traditional questions developed more than 50 years ago by the Michigan school (Campbell et al. 1960, Paparo, De Sio and Brady 2020). Finally, in the Italian context, PTVs have been extensively used to reconstruct the party space of competition, the location of the voters in such a space, and to investigate the left-right dimension without the need to explicitly use the measure that refers to the spatial dimension of the competition (Schadee, Segatti and Vezzoni 2019).

4. Research questions and data

In this article, we provide an empirical analysis of PTVs in the Italian context, describing their distribution at the time of the 2022 general election, and propose an application to study the electoral space of competition based on a multidimensional analysis[3] of their joint distributions spanning from 2020 to 2022, a time span dramatically marked by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, the electoral outcome of the 2022 general election, with the clear-cut victory of the (centre-)right coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, has led many pundits to speculate about what would have been the results if the opponents to the right-wing coalition had succeeded in building a coalition to achieve a higher level of competitiveness in the first-past-the-post electoral districts (the so-called majoritarian part of the electoral law). But to what extent are these speculations consistent with the actual space of electoral competition among main Italian parties? In other words, in which areas of the electoral space does the competition unfold and how did these areas evolve since the outbreak of the pandemic? The analysis of party competition over the two years preceding the general election is functional to understanding whether its configuration in 2022 is contingent on the electoral campaign dynamics or rather it has more long-lasting roots. To answer these questions, we use data coming from the ResPOnsE COVID-19 study, which covers the period 2020-2022 with four waves of data collection on the adult Italian population (Vezzoni et al. 2020, Biolcati et al. 2021, Vezzoni et al. 2022). The study is intended to investigate the social, political and economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on Italian citizens. The study counts over 30,000 interviews over five waves, part of them collected with a panel design. The samples come from a commercial online community of an Italian research institute (SWG), and are collected respecting the quotas for gender, age and geographical area of residence.

Specifically, we use here the data coming from waves 1 (spring 2020), 3 (spring 2021), 4 (autumn-winter 2021) and 5 (autumn 2022), counting respectively 15,673,

[3] As we will clarify in the next section, the multidimensional analysis is constrained to two dimensions. We are aware that this choice can have some limitations and an alternative solution based on three dimensions could be employed. Nonetheless, the addition of a further dimension to the classical two-dimensional solution would accommodate for residual segments of the electorate that are in any case marginal and of ambiguous meaning (e.g., voters giving high scores to all parties).

9,222, 3,032 and 4,768 interviews.[4] We applied post-stratification weights based on the cross-classification of gender, area of residence, age group, level of education and (for wave 5 only) voting behaviour.

In our research, the PTVs were asked for all those parties that reached the 3 per cent electoral threshold:[5] Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI), the League (Lega), Go Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI), Action-Italy Alive (*Azione-Italia Viva*, Azione-Iv), Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, Pd), Green Europe-Italian Left (*Europa Verde-Sinistra Italiana*, Verdi-SI), Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5s). Table 1 shows the distribution of the PTVs for the parties, divided into four groups and further distinguishing between those available and not available to a given party, with the threshold set at the value of 6.

Table 1. Distribution of the propensity to vote for the main Italian parties in 2022 (percentages, N = 4768)

	Propensity to vote					General election 2022	
	Not available to the party			Available to the party		% outcome for the party	
	Don't know	0	1 to 5	6 to 10	Total	On valid votes	On total voters
FdI	9	43	16	32	100	25.9	15.9
Lega	8	49	21	22	100	8.8	5.4
FI	8	50	23	19	100	8.1	5.0
Azione-Iv	9	51	27	13	100	7.8	4.8
Pd	9	44	25	22	100	19	11.6
Verdi-SI	10	50	26	14	100	3.6	2.2
M5s	8	47	24	21	100	15.4	9.4

Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

Observing the table, it is possible to detect some of the characteristics of the PTVs discussed above. First of all, it clearly emerges that the majority of respondents give a valid answer to the question and less than 10% adopt the 'I don't know' option. As expected, zero (complete unwillingness to vote for the party) is the modal value, i.e., the category receiving the most responses, for all parties. With increasing values, readiness to vote for the party increases as well. Where to place the cut-point between what we consider low and high values of PTV is an arbitrary matter. In the Italian context, it makes sense to indicate 6 as the cut-point, in line with the well-known scale of school marks, 6 being the lowest pass mark. Thus, values between 1 and 5 can still be considered low. Values from 6 upwards are compatible with a potential willingness to vote for the party. FdI is clearly the party that attracts the largest number of potential voters, almost one third

[4] In wave 5 the panel component (84.9 per cent of interviews) was integrated with new interviews to maintain the representativeness of the sample according to the aforementioned quotas.

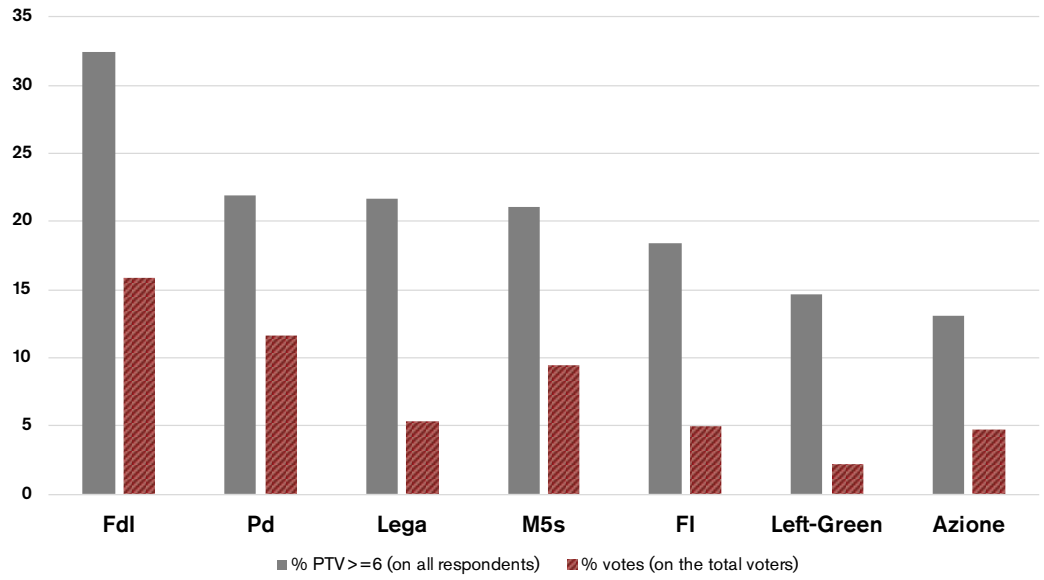
[5] As regards the allocation of PR seats, national thresholds of 3 per cent apply to single party list votes. According to this criterion, we excluded the respondents who voted for +Europe, which in the 2022 election reached 2.8 per cent. We acknowledge that +Europa, though small, is a relevant option for voters, especially when considering the area of potential support for the Pd. Unfortunately, it is not only a matter of an arbitrary decision to cut parties below 3 per cent but also of available data, as the Ptv for +Europa was asked for only in one wave. However, the conclusions drawn in the paper do not change, including one party below the threshold.

of the sample (32%). Pd, Lega and M5s follow with slightly more than one fifth (or 20%) of the sample. Lower portions of the sample are available to FI, Verdi-SI and Azione-Iv (below 15%). It should be noted that the percentages are expressed on the total sample N. Thus, for each party, that portion largely exceeds the percentage of votes received in the 2022 election computed on the total number of potential voters, thus including abstention, white ballot and invalid votes, as shown in the last column of Table 1. Figure 2 highlights this aspect, comparing the percentage of respondents in the sample that are available to a party (PTV ≥ 6, solid bars) and the actual percentage of votes received in the 2022 elections (computed on the whole electorate). This comparison suggests that the success of a party is not only a function of the size of its potential electorate, i.e. those open to voting for it, but also of the ability of the party to translate that availability into votes. It is clear that the distance between potential voters and actual votes varies largely from party to party. FdI, Pd and M5s seem to be more effective in getting the votes of their potential electorate, while the other parties express poorer performances.

The central focus to understanding these differences is on the translation rules from utilities to actual votes (see Figure 1) and, at the end of the day, on competition between parties that share (at least partially) the same potential electorate. Once more, PTVs show their usefulness for studying electoral competition in full strength.

In the following paragraph, we will show an innovative method to consider jointly all the PTVs for the main parties and study in this way the whole electoral space of competition.

Figure 2. Percentage of available voters (PTV≥6) in the sample (N=4867) and percentage of votes received in the 2022 election (Low Chamber) on all voters (N ca. $46*10^6$) for each of the main Italian parties



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

5. The configuration of the political space after the 2022 Italian general election

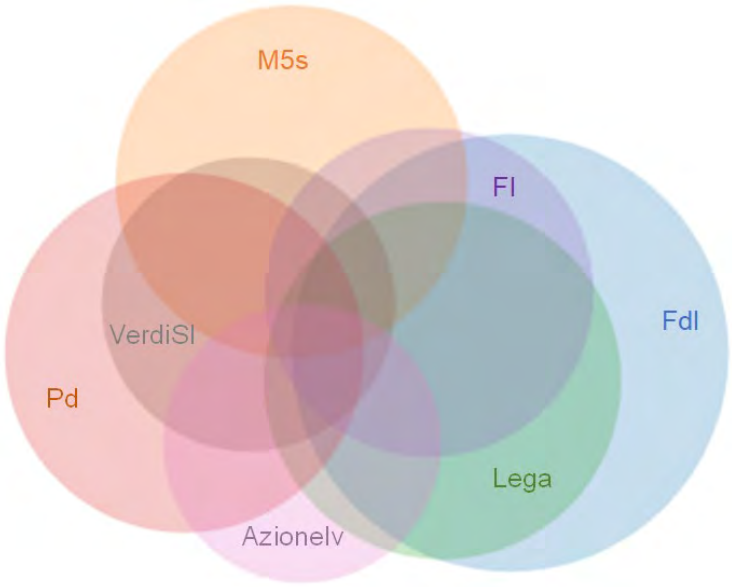
In the previous section we discussed how PTVs provide an effective tool to study the political competition space. In fact, it is precisely by analysing the PTVs for the main Italian parties that we can fully answer the previous research questions, going beyond arguments built on the marginal distributions of voting intentions which represent a mere snapshot of the balance of power between parties. The analysis of the PTVs allows us to understand the level of electoral uncertainty and to make counter-factual reasoning about how difficult (or easy) it would have been for voters to vote differently from how they actually did. At an aggregate level, this result supplies an indication of the potential for electoral volatility (van der Eijk and Elkink 2017). This is a particularly relevant topic in light of the great electoral volatility that has characterized Italy and Europe in recent years (Emanuele, Chiaramonte and Soare 2018), as seen in the last political and EU Parliament elections. In this regard, the 2022 general election marks for Italy the third highly-volatile election in a row, signalling the unprecedented instability experienced by the Italian party system over the past 15 years (Chiaramonte et al. 2023).

The space of the Italian electoral competition in 2022 can be described with the diagram shown in Figure 3 (a so-called Venn diagram).[6] The size of the circles is an estimate of the size of each party's potential electorate (PTV equal to or greater than 6).[7] The larger the share of respondents that gave a PTV of at least 6 for a party, the larger its circumference. The overlapping areas between the circles represent the share of potential voters 'in common' between two or more parties (i.e., those voters who express a PTV equal to or greater than 6 for the parties in question). It is worth repeating that this is not an estimate of the vote, but an estimate of the propensity to vote and therefore an estimate of the electoral potential of each party, namely its attractiveness. If we look at the electoral potential of the main Italian parties after the 2022 Italian general election (data collected in November 2022), we immediately notice that FdI has clearly the biggest electoral potential, followed by Pd and M5s, while more limited is the electoral potential of Lega, of FI and, especially, of Azione-Iv.

[6] These diagrams were drawn based on the results of a Constrained Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) analysis applying the algorithm developed by Ben Frederickson in Javascript (https://github.com/benfred/venn.js) and implemented in Stata. Constrained MDS improves the classic MDS layout in being aware of subsets and disjoint circles/relationships and this is particularly suitable when there are more than 3 circles. There are several alternatives to the constrained MDS to handle joint distributions of PTV, among which multiple correspondence analysis. Nonetheless, once decided for the space constraints (e.g. two dimension solutions), the results are comparable. Moreover, the option selected here, integrating the results with Venn diagrams, conveys a clear idea of the relative size of the electoral potential of a party and its overlapping with the electorates of other parties, which was the scope of the article.

[7] Of course, we could have chosen a different cut-point between what we consider low and high values of PTV. In Appendix A we reproduced the political space shown in Figure 3, but with different cut-points for high PTV: at 5 (Figure A1), at 7 (Figure A2) and at 8 (Figure A3). As expected, the diagrams show that when we lower the cut-point, the overlapping areas (voters available to more than one party) increase, whereas these areas decrease (thus voters available to only one party increase) if we raise the cut-point. In particular, it should be noticed that results for PTVs≥8 approximate those for voting choices. We believe that the cut-point we have chosen (Ptv≥6) offers an adequate solution for our purposes, also for the reasons outlined in the previous section.

Figure 3. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6), November 2022



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

This overall picture is consistent with the outcome of the election, which saw the unprecedented success of the radical-right FdI, led by Giorgia Meloni (who would become the first female Prime Minister in Italian history). FdI, indeed, moved from 4.4 per cent of the votes in 2018 to 26 per cent in 2022. This incredible rise came at the expense primarily of FdI's main allies, Lega and FI, which lost millions of votes compared to the previous election (Chiaramonte et al. 2023). Overall, the centre-right coalition sharply won the other line-ups, i.e., the centre-left coalition led by the Pd, the M5s and the new centrist subject Azione-Iv. A great deal of speculation has been produced about what would have been the results if the opponents to the right-wing coalition had succeeded in building a coalition to achieve a higher level of competitiveness in the first-past-the-post electoral districts and, therefore, a better result in terms of seats. Nevertheless, this argument relies on the assumption that voters in this area were ready to vote for a coalition that included parties like Pd, M5s and Azione-Iv, which had clearly distinct platforms and strategies. In this regard, Figure 3 is particularly useful for a twofold reason. On the one hand, it shows that there is a strong overlap of the potential electorates of the centre-right parties, as can be seen from the large overlapping areas between the circles of FdI, Lega and FI (i.e., respondents who show a PTV ≥6 for two or three parties of the centre-right coalition). This means that an overwhelming majority of right-wing voters are open to moving from one party to another of the centre-right coalition, rewarding especially the biggest party (FdI), which has also a significant share of 'uncontestable' voters who do not consider the possibility of voting for another party (contrary to FI and Lega). On the other hand, Pd, Azione-Iv and M5s do not share the same potential electorate. Although there is a significant share of voters who are open to voting for both the Pd and M5s, even greater is the share of voters who consider the possibility of voting only for the Pd or only for the M5s. The same occurs as regards the relationship between Pd and Azione-IV (although the loyal voters of the latter are far

fewer, considering also that this party is much smaller than Pd). Furthermore, Azione-Iv is located on the opposite side of the political space compared to the M5s, sharing few potential voters with the party led by Giuseppe Conte, while sharing a significant amount of potential voters with centre-right parties. In this regard, Azione-Iv can be considered a sort of 'bridge' between Pd and centre-right parties, consistently with its centrist nature. A similar role is played by Verdi-SI, but in this case the 'bridge' is between M5s and Pd. This is consistent with the fact that Verdi-SI ran allied with Pd at the 2022 election, while advocating the need to include the M5s in the alliance. However, Verdi-SI seems to have no reserve of loyal voters: practically all its potential voters consider the possibility of voting also for Pd or for M5s (or for both).

To sum up, the configuration of the political space based on the PTVs confirms for the electorate what we witnessed at the level of the party elites during the 2022 electoral campaign and afterwards: there is substantial unity on the right, whereas there are many more distinctions in the opposite camp. Where does this configuration of the electoral competition space come from? Is it only the result of the recent events that marked the 2022 general election and the birth of Meloni's government or does it have deeper roots? To answer this question, in the next section we will analyse the evolution of the party competition space between 2020 and 2021, a time span marked by the pandemic of Covid-19.

6. The configuration of the political space during the pandemic

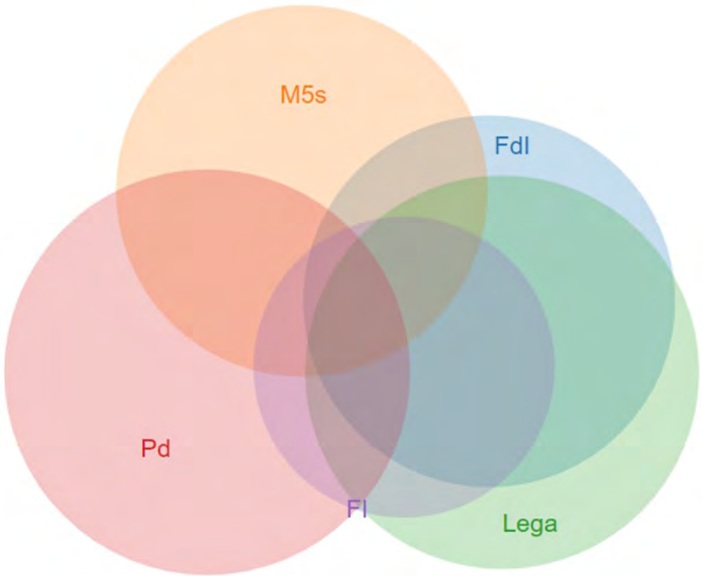
Since the beginning of 2020, Italy has been hit by an intertwining of social, economic and political changes with few precedents in republican history. In March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic exploded in Italy. In addition to the health emergency and related economic difficulties, the country faced a significant reconfiguration of the political framework. A year after the outbreak of the pandemic, a political crisis concerning the management of the funds of the European economic recovery programme – the Next Generation EU – decreed the end of the Conte II government, which had led the country since the spread of Covid-19. In February 2021 the so-called 'yellow-red' government, built on the alliance between the M5s, the Pd, Iv and Leu (*Liberi e Uguali*, Free and Equal), was replaced by a national unity executive headed by former president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi and supported by all the main political forces present in parliament, with the exception of the FdI.

6.1. National patterns between spring 2020 and spring 2021

If we look at the electoral potential of the main Italian parties during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (spring-summer 2020, see Figure 4), we immediately notice that Pd, Lega and FdI, followed closely by M5s, have the biggest electoral potential, while that of FI is much more limited. We have to recall that this period was initially marked by a decision of the Conte II cabinet to impose a strict national lockdown to contain the spread of Covid-19. After May 2021, the government gradually reopened economic and social activities, thus ending lockdown, while maintaining mandatory face masks, social distancing and isolation measures. This stance was criticized by the right-wing opposition parties, especially FdI and Lega, who suggested more emphasis on the economy.

Looking at Figure 4, the other fact that immediately catches the eye is the strong overlap of the potential electorates of the centre-right parties, as can be seen from the large overlapping area between the circle of Lega and that of FdI. In particular, the share of potential voters in common with Lega and FdI (i.e. those who show a PTV ≥6 for both parties) is greater than the share of Salvini's and Meloni's parties voters who do not seriously consider the possibility of voting for both parties. The same applies to *Forza Italia*, with the difference that the latter appears at the centre of the intersections of all potential electorates, showing the vulnerability of the party, competing not only with its centre-right allies, but also (partially) with the Pd and the M5s. Lega and FdI instead show a smaller electoral overlap area with the Pd, while the overlap area with the M5s is greater (similar to that between FI and the M5s). In the latter case, it should be noted that unlike in the past (Emanuele and Paparo 2018), among the centre-right parties it is no longer Lega that shows the greatest overlap with M5s, but FdI.

Figure 4. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6), spring-summer 2020



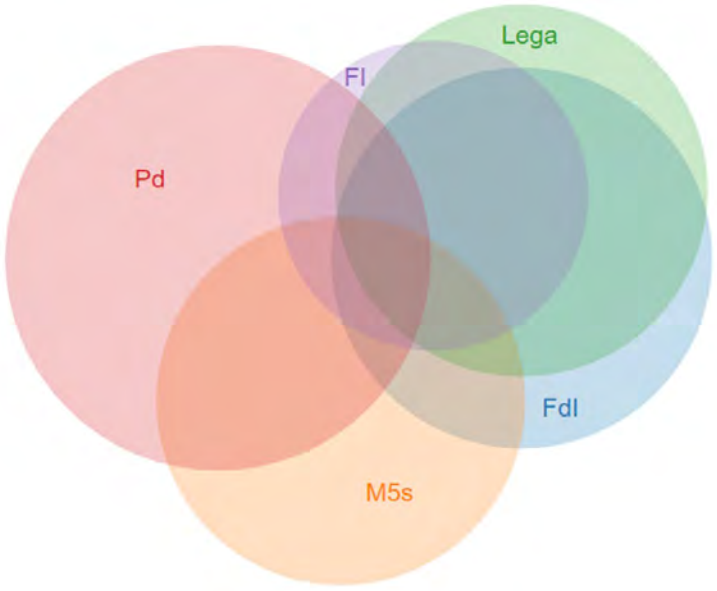
Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

After a year of pandemic, the picture we have just described is substantially confirmed if we look at the same data for the spring of 2021 (Figure 5) when the national-alliance cabinet led by Draghi had recently replaced the Conte II cabinet, the country was facing a further pandemic wave and the anti-Covid-19 vaccination campaign had started. The analysis of the Italian political space confirms that on the right there is a compact bloc: conservative voters are open to shifting from one party to the other without major problems, with the major potential electorates shown by Lega and FdI. Again, a significant share of voters shows high PTVs for both the M5s and the FdI, whose anti-establishment rhetoric resembles that originally characterizing M5s. Berlusconi's party is confirmed as the most central in the political space, but also as the most vulnerable

because it is subject to multiple competitive pressures: almost all of its potential voters seriously consider the possibility of voting for another party.

On the other side, the Pd led by Enrico Letta, like that previously led by Nicola Zingaretti, is confirmed as the most peripheral within this political space, even if once again it shares a consistent share of voters with the M5s and, to a lesser extent, with the centre-right parties (in particular FI). The isolation of the Pd had already been captured by other analyses that previously relied on Venn diagrams (Emanuele and Paparo 2018), although the overlap between potential voters of the Pd and M5s has increased over time, probably because of their common experience in both the Conte II and Draghi cabinets. Finally, the M5s is confirmed to be more vulnerable than the Pd, but more crosscutting and attractive also to non-left voters, as we said earlier.

Figure 5. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6), spring 2021

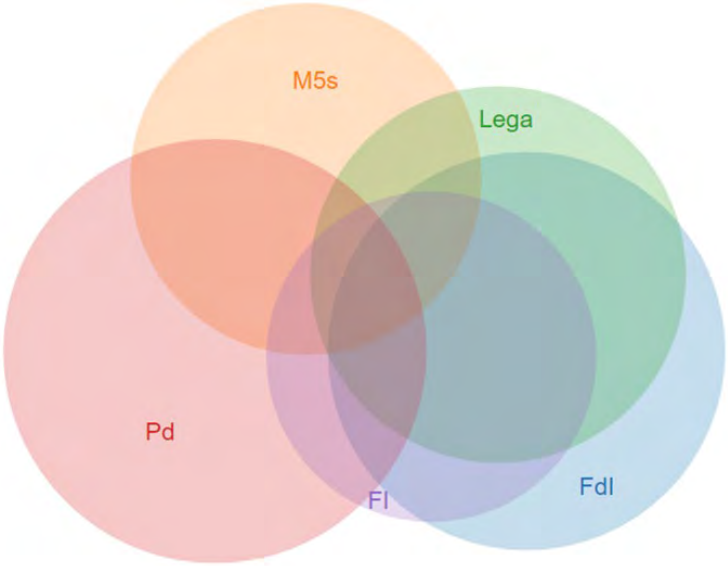


Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

6.2. National patterns in autumn-winter 2021

During the fourth pandemic wave and after the municipal elections held in October 2021, we carried out a further wave of our survey from November 2021 to December 2021 (see Figure 6). We can see some elements of novelty compared to previous survey waves. The electoral potential of the M5s has reduced and, at the same time, it is less cross-cutting: indeed, the area of competition between M5s and centre-right parties is smaller. Conversely, the Pd is less isolated in this political competition space. During the years of the pandemic the readiness of right-wing voters to change electoral preferences has benefited Meloni's party, whose position of 'coherent' opposition has increased its attractiveness.

Figure 6. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6), autumn-winter 2021



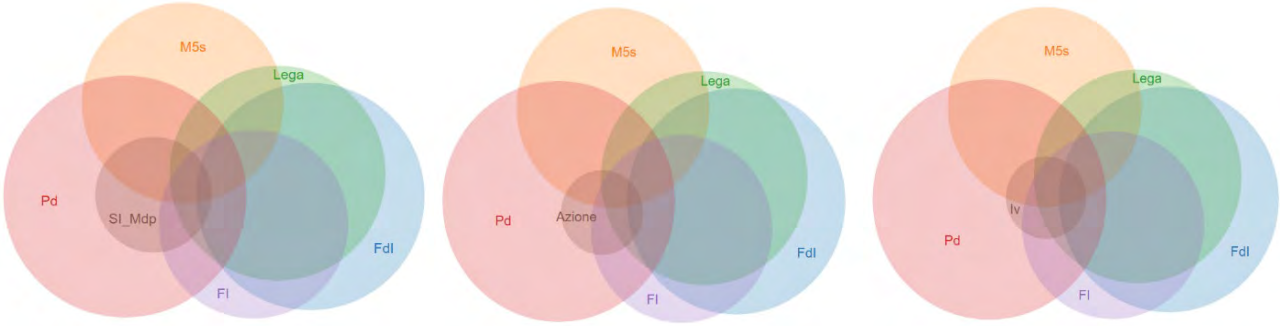
Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

Another novelty compared to the previous waves is that in the questionnaire we asked for the PTVs also for the smaller parties. In particular, we asked for the PTV for the Italian Left-Progressive Democratic Movement (*Sinistra Italiana-Movimento Democratico Progressista*, SI-Mdp),[8] for Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*, Iv) and for Action (Azione). The question was put randomly to one third of respondents for each party. Figure 7 shows the potential electorates of Italian parties, including the minor ones. In general, the potential electorates of SI-Mdp, Azione and Iv are much smaller than those of the major parties. Furthermore, the three parties are located in different areas of the political space. The SI-Mdp electoral constituency is a sort of *trait d'union* between that of the Pd and that of the M5s. This is in line with the favourable attitude shown by the leadership of SI-Mdp as regards the electoral alliance between centre-left parties and M5s, which then collapsed after the crisis of Draghi's government triggered (among others) by the leader of M5s, Giuseppe Conte.

Conversely, both Azione and Iv are more central in the political space: they compete with all parties, in particular with the Pd and FI. That said, it should be noticed that the circles representing the potential electorates of Iv and Azione are both included in the circle of the Pd. This means that their main area of electoral competition, indeed, was with the centre-left party led by Letta. This is not totally surprising given that the leader of Iv, Matteo Renzi, was a former prime minister and leader of the Pd, whereas the leader of Azione, Carlo Calenda, was a former Pd member of the European Parliament.

[8] At the time Mdp and SI were together in the wake of the joint electoral list created at the 2018 general election (LeU). For the 2022 general election, Mdp-Article 1 decided to present its candidates within the list of the Pd, while SI created a joint list with the Greens. Similarly, Azione and IV created a joint list.

Figure 7. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6) including some minor parties, autumn-winter 2021



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

So far, we have analysed the configuration of the space of electoral competition at the national level. However, we know that in Italy territorial differences have always mattered in explaining the electoral results. Therefore, for sake of completeness, we repeated the analysis using both the 2021 spring data and the 2021 autumn-winter data, disaggregated into three geopolitical zones: North, former Red Belt, South and Islands (see Figure B1 and Figure B2, respectively, in Appendix B). In a nutshell, the configuration of the electoral competition space at the macro-area level does not differ much from that previously observed at the national level (Figure 6).[9]

7. Concluding remarks

Focusing on public opinion, this article has examined Italians' actual electoral preferences, which are the most immediate antecedents of the vote choice. In this regard, we have clarified – on a conceptual and empirical level – the distinction between two instruments to detect political attitudes: propensities to vote and the traditional voting intentions. On the basis of the configuration of the propensities to vote, it has been possible to reconstruct the configuration of the overlapping areas between the potential electorates of the main Italian parties, which in turn represent the space of electoral competition. The latter was analysed after the 2022 general election and in the two previous years to understand whether Italians' political attitudes towards the main parties have changed during the pandemic.

In conclusion, this analysis has pointed out some results that can be useful for interpreting the dynamics of party competition at the time of Covid-19. The first is that in the

[9] The actual difference across areas is that, as expected, the size of the potential electorate of the main Italian parties varies according to the zone considered, but to a different degree. Especially, the M5s shows a much smaller potential electorate in the north than in the south (with the electorate in the former Red Belt in an intermediate position), confirming the 'southernization' of the party that has taken place since the general election of 2018. Furthermore, the south is the area where there is more competition (consistently with the area's high electoral volatility during the so-called Second Republic). Compared to the past (with the remarkable exception of the 2018 general election, see Cataldi and Emanuele 2019), the novelty is that the former Red Belt, once an absolutely non-competitive area from an electoral standpoint, now is more similar to the south than to the north. In the latter, the predominance of the centre-right is clear and the possible voting shifts across the left-right divide, in particular between the Pd and the centre-right parties, are minimal.

electorate there was a significant willingness to change vote choice. This depends not so much on the fact that individual voting propensities radically changed over time, as on the fact that there were multiple availabilities: significant segments of the electorate were effectively contestable between multiple parties. In particular, within the centre-right area, there was a large share of voters open to moving from one party to another. Currently, it is the party led by Giorgia Meloni that is exploiting this greater openness to vote switching within the centre-right area, as shown also by the results of the general election held on 25 September 2022. Undoubtedly, the decline recorded by the Lega and FI at the ballot box is explained by the strong competition exercised on the right by FdI, which exploited its role as the (almost) only parliamentary opposition during the past legislature (2018-2022). This role probably allowed FdI to leverage also the malaise caused by a year of pandemic among specific sections of the population, in particular those most affected by the restrictive measures imposed by the two governments (Conte II and Draghi) to face the pandemic waves. And among the most affected categories are undoubtedly the self-employed, the traditional constituency of the centre-right parties. As we saw in a previous analysis (Ladini and Maggini 2021), Lega voters were more lukewarm than those of the Pd towards the Draghi government, probably being more in line with the anti-establishment position taken by FdI. Similarly, *Forza Italia* has been subject to much competition, not only on the right (FdI), but also in the centre (Azione-Iv).

On the other side of the political space, the common experience of being in government during the pandemic seems to have made the potential electorates of the Pd and M5s more compatible than in the past. However, the overlap is much less than that found in the centre-right. Furthermore, the Pd on the one hand appears to be the party with the greatest share of 'loyal' voters, who do not consider voting for other parties; on the other hand, it appears also as the most peripheral party in the space of political competition, although this isolation decreased after the municipal elections of October 2021. Hence, the Pd on the one hand has a reserve of loyal voters that allows it to be resilient even in the event of adversity; on the other hand, it has to compete for significant shares of votes with both the M5s and Azione-Iv. Furthermore, the Pd shows low attractiveness to centre-right electorates. In general, the left-right dimension in its symbolic meaning (Schadee, Segatti and Vezzoni 2019) still seems to strongly limit the voting movements between areas of the opposite political colour. Compared to the Pd, the M5s and especially Azione-IV appear to be more attractive to right-wing voters. For the M5s, however, the electoral attractiveness cross-cutting left and right boundaries has significantly diminished compared to the past. Furthermore, this competitive profile means that the M5s is also more sensitive to electoral volatility, with the risk of losing voters in different directions. This occurred mainly towards abstention and, partially, towards FdI in the last general election (Chiaramonte et al. 2023). Electoral volatility could affect even more Azione-Iv, which has a much smaller potential electorate (and fewer 'loyal' voters) compared to both the Pd and the M5s. Finally, the M5s potential electorate has significantly reduced compared to the great success of the 2018 general election, especially in the north, which accentuates its 'southern' electoral profile in line with the territorial pattern actually observed in the last general election.

Before the electoral campaign for the 2022 general election there was a certain debate on a possible alliance between Pd and M5s, which then failed when Letta refused to

forgive Conte for having triggered the crisis in the Draghi government. In the light of our data, an alliance between the two parties would not have been unreasonable, even if it would have been less organic and feasible than the alliance in the centre-right, given that there are significant shares of voters of both M5s and Pd who rank the (possible) ally poorly. And the latter point is not something contingent, related to the events that marked the fall of the Draghi cabinet and the latest electoral campaign. As shown by our analysis, this aspect characterised both the electorates throughout the entire period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, when both parties were together in government. An eventual alliance including Azione-Iv appears even more difficult, given the low compatibility between the M5s electorate and the Azione-Iv electorate. In other words, as of today, strong reasons for division between the main opposition parties persist, which had prevented these parties from running in the same coalition at the 2022 general election.

Conversely, the governing coalition can rely on a rather homogenous electoral bloc: right-wing voters are open to switching their vote from one party to another within the coalition. This time they awarded an astonishing result to the previous junior partner FdI, while assuring victory to the overall coalition. This sort of interchangeability across centre-right electorates shows both the existence of a (almost) single right-wing electorate and a high level of competitiveness within the centre-right coalition. As for the first aspect, it is significant that a single right-wing electorate existed throughout the 2020-2021 time span we analysed, regardless of the fact that the reference parties were together in opposition (Conte II government) or divided (Draghi government). The unity of the right-wing electoral bloc seems to have deep roots: after all, the format of the coalition has more or less been the same since 1994, although party labels have changed over time as well as the balance of power within the coalition (with a clear right-wing turn) and the coalition's leaders (first Berlusconi, then Salvini, now Meloni). However, the high level of competitiveness within the centre-right coalition can be a powerful factor of instability in the relations between the coalition parties and therefore in the long run it can cause troubles for the current government led by Meloni. It all remains to be seen.

Of course, future political development could change in the long run the configuration of the party competition space we have outlined so far. Furthermore, the structure of the political space and (in)compatibility across electorates is something that goes beyond the analysis of the propensities to vote. In this regard, more clues could be provided in further research investigating how the different electoral segments as measured through the PTVs are ideologically characterised, both in terms of self-placement on the left-right continuum and in terms of positions on policy issues. Future research, building up on our contribution, might also explore even more innovative solutions to map and visualize multidimensional spaces of electoral competition.

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risposta dell'opinione pubblica a eventi imprevisti? Il progetto ResPOnsE COVID-19 (How to monitor the public opinion response to unforeseen events? The ResPOnsE COVID-19 project)', *Polis*, *Ricerche e studi su società e politica*, 1: 165-177, https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1424/100292

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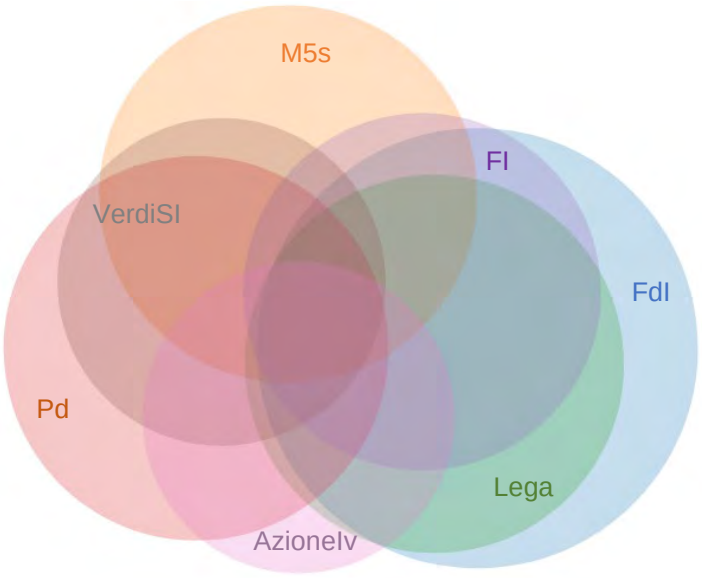
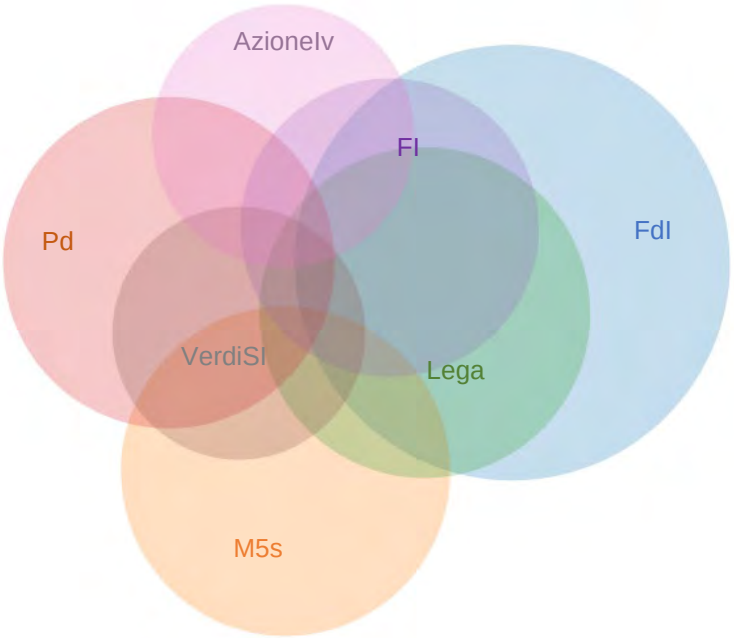
Appendix A.

Figure A1. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥5), November 2022



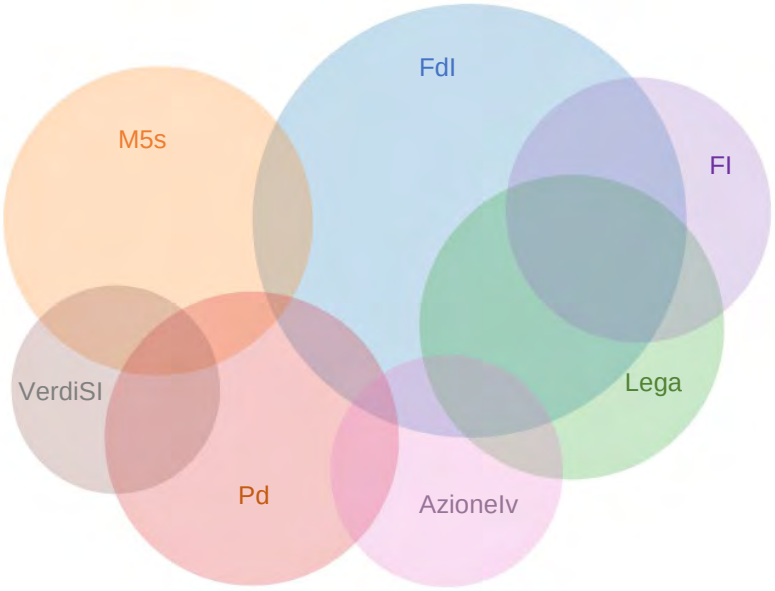
Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

Figure A2. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥7), November 2022



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

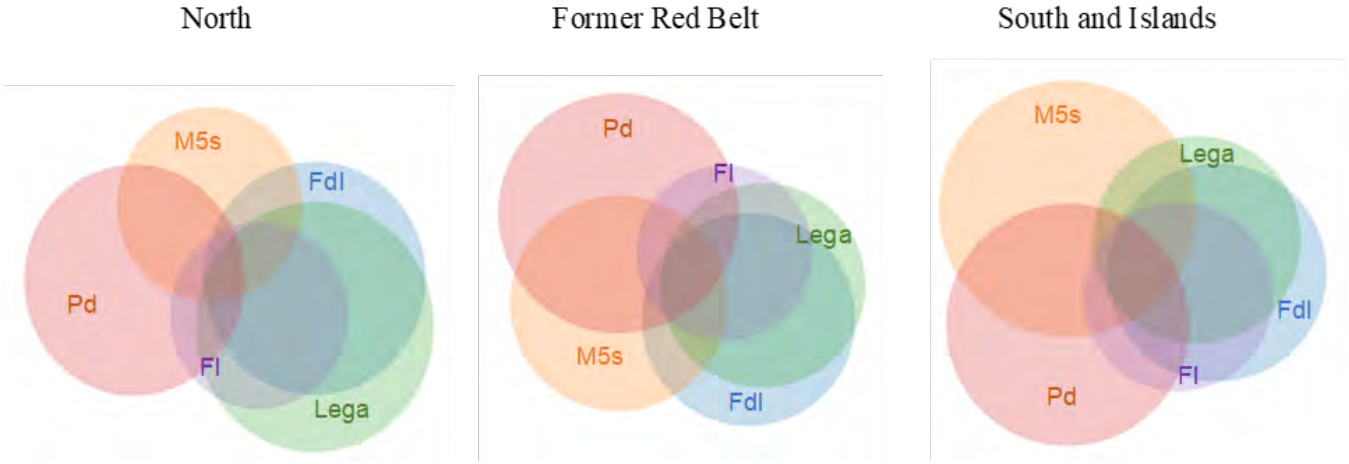
Figure A3. Venn diagram of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥8), November 2022



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

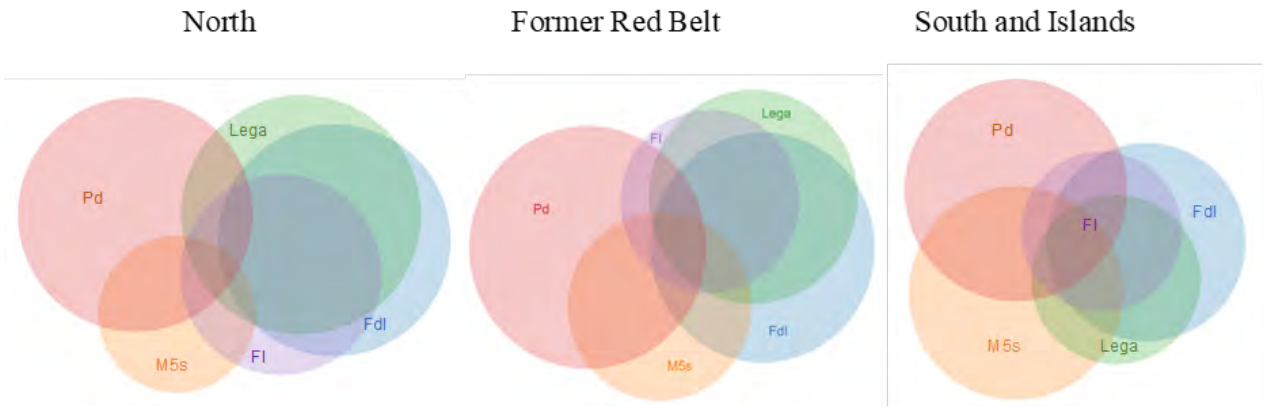
Appendix B.

Figure B1. Venn diagrams of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6) by geopolitical zone, spring 2021



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

Figure B2. Venn diagrams of the potential electorates of the main Italian parties (PTV≥6) by geopolitical zone, autumn-winter 2021



Source: ResPOnsE COVID-19.

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Ministerial Comebacks: Explaining Reselection and Promotion of Cabinet Members in Italy

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Abstract

Three cabinets (Conte I, Conte II, and Draghi) entered office during the 18th legislative term in Italy. In spite of the significant ideological differences between them, no full alternation of parties in government occurred. The largest party in parliament – the Five Star Movement – participated in all three cabinets, while the League and the Democratic Party took part in two of them (the League in the Conte I and Draghi, the Democratic Party in the Conte II and Draghi); other minor parties entered the Conte II and Draghi as well. Did party continuity lead to ministerial stability? This article puts the 18th legislative term in perspective, through a longitudinal comparison of all Italian partisan cabinets from 1994 to 2022 (15 cabinets). In particular, it aims to account for continuity and changes within the Italian ministerial elite across different cabinets, also controlling for the gendered aspect of cabinet reselections and promotions. It answers the following questions. What makes ministerial reselection likely? Do political and personal background count in being reappointed and promoted? Based on original data, the analysis shows that remarkable previous political experience, age, and time matter. In contrast, the type of portfolio held in cabinet and gender do not have a significant impact. In this context, the 18th legislative term appears in line with the general pattern, but it distances itself from other terms defined by party continuity across multiple cabinets. The article contributes to the debates about personnel turnover, representation, and policy-makers' stability in democratic cabinets.

1. Introduction

Political executives in parliamentary democracies are collective institutions made up of a prime minister (PM) and a number of senior ministers. Some of these ministers stay in office longer than others. Moreover, some cabinet members serve in multiple cabinets, while some serve just in one. This article deals with ministerial reselection across cabinets in Italy.

One of the key concerns of the comparative literature on ministerial careers in parliamentary systems has been the explanation of ministerial selection and deselection, with scholars focusing on both structural constraints and actors' strategies (e.g., Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Dowding and Dumont 2009, 2015). In this context, it has been observed that a person's social and political background, as well as gender, affects the likelihood of their becoming a minister (e.g., Blondel and Thiébault 1991; Krook and

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O'Brien 2012; Hallerberg and Wehner 2018). At the same time, strong prime ministers tend to dismiss cabinet members to reduce agency loss (Indriðason and Kam 2008), to tackle ministerial scandals (Berlinski et al. 2012), or to boost government popularity (Miwa 2018). The common denominator of this literature is that it concentrates on ministerial selection and deselection as discrete events or as parts of broader cabinet reshuffles *within one cabinet* (Helms and Vercesi 2022). What the relevant studies miss is to account for what fosters the *re*selection of a given minister in a new cabinet, even after a period out of office. As Blondel (1980: 196) observed already in 1980, many executive members stay 'close to the corridors of power after their downfall from high office, hoping to return to the [...] position later'. Reselection is more infrequent than 'one-shot selections' and, therefore, it needs to be studied as a phenomenon in itself, driven by specific political logics.

Admittedly, studies of elite circulation in democracy refer to this topic indirectly (Verzichelli 2018). Yet, there is a scholarship paucity about the individual-based determinants of ministerial returns (see Fleming 2021). This is surprising in light, on the one hand, of the important role that personal background and previous experience play in the definition of political career paths (Müller-Rommel et al. 2020) and, on the other hand, of the impact of ministerial profiles on political representation and government performance. For example, female ministers increase women's empowerment and cabinet stability (Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018; Franceschet et al. 2017; Krauss and Kroeber 2021), while social policy may depend on the partisanship and the gender of a minister (Atchison and Down 2009; Alexiadou 2015, 2020).

This article is an attempt to fill the literature gap, by comparing the personnel makeup of the three Italian cabinets of the 18th legislative term (2018-2022) to the previous ministerial teams (from 1994). The aim is to detect the factors that foster (or undermine) the continuity of the ministerial elite as well as ministerial promotions through government changes, when parties come back to power; the investigation pays attention to the possible gendered facet of these phenomena.

The driving research questions are the following. What explains the multiple appointments of ministers from the same party to different cabinets? Which individual characteristics make a minister more likely to return and to be promoted? The 18th legislative term is put into perspective because of its particular configuration. Compared to previous terms, this was characterized by the partial alternation in government of the three largest parties in parliament across three cabinets: the first cabinet leaning to the ideological right, the second to the left, and the third supported by all major parties in parliament. The three cabinets – Conte I, Conte II, and Draghi – were supported by different types of multiparty coalitions. While the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) was in office in all three cabinets, the League (*Lega*) was in office in the first and third and the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) in the latest two. In relation to other terms, the 18th legislative term allows an investigation into whether general explaining factors are time-dependent or if they also hold within one single legislative term, with large parties coming and going from the cabinet.

The Italian case is particularly suitable to answer the research questions. Indeed, Italy is a parliamentary democracy with frequent cabinet turnover. Since the breakdown of the first republican party system in the early 1990s, the country has been

characterized by the frequent alternation of parties in government and party system changes (Zucchini and Pedrazzani 2021); this phase has led to large ministerial turnover and diversity in the ministers' background (Verzichelli 2009; Musella et al. 2022).[1] The focus on the 1994-2022 period (made up of seven legislative terms) allows investigating ministerial reappointments between both consecutive and non-consecutive cabinets.

In the next section, we present the theoretical framework and infer four hypotheses, based on the extant literature. Subsequently, we describe our case study and the most relevant aspects of our interest. The fourth section introduces the dataset and tests the expectations. The final section provides a discussion and suggests research outlooks. Overall, the work contributes to knowledge of the selection patterns of top politicians in contemporary democracies and has implications for the debates about personnel turnover, representation, and policy-makers' stability in democratic cabinets.

2. Party Delegation, Ministerial Background and Reselection

In this article, we assume that ministers are ambitious politicians (Schlesinger 1966) interested in surviving in office and trying to avoid steps back down their career ladder. As stressed by Blondel (1991: 153), a ministerial position in parliamentary democracies is usually the 'apex of a political career and indeed a career *tout court* [...]. To cease being a minister is thus a form of decline'. Save, for example, for rare cases of promotion to a top executive regional office or to outstanding positions within supranational organizations, most ministers should be interested in being reappointed after leaving the cabinet. Moreover, they would probably prefer to be reappointed to prestigious ministerial portfolios, if not as prime ministers.[2]

Ministers' chances of getting the job are subordinate to the preferences of those who pick them. Although the prime minister is formally in charge of their selection, the true selectors (i.e., the principals) of the ministers (i.e., the agents) in coalition governments are their respective parties, embodied by party leaders (Andeweg 2000).[3] These leaders are the ultimate selectors of their own party representatives in the cabinet (Bäck and Carroll 2020), whereas the prime minister has greater autonomy in selecting non-partisan ministers (Costa Pinto et al. 2018).[4] In this context, (the prospect of) reselection is one of the most potentially incisive instruments that party leaders have to induce a minister to behave according to the party agenda, even after being appointed (Andeweg 2000: 389).

[1] Higher ministerial stability characterized the first decades of the republic (see Calise and Mannheimer 1982).

[2] We do not consider voluntary retirements. However, they are mostly dependent on the age of the outgoing minister and we control for this in the empirical analysis.

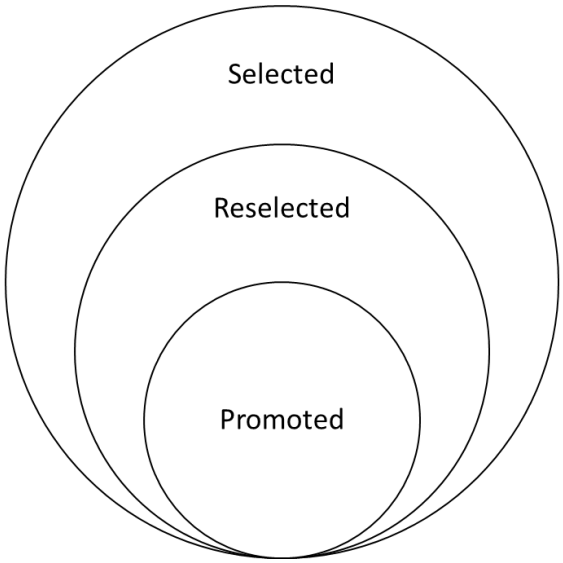
[3] Party leaders will have to accommodate the requests of internal party factions in making their choices.

[4] One should notice that, as long as party organizations are strong, political parties have – through their leaders – full control of ministerial selection. In contrast, the number of non-partisan technocrats increases when parties lose their grasp on society and electoral volatility is high (e.g., Emanuele et al. 2022; Helms 2022). The logic of technocratic appointments, however, does not coincide with the logic of partisan appointments. Factors such as commitment to policy change and international credibility, rather than party reliability, are of major importance (e.g., Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Alexiadou et al. 2021). Moreover, the reappointments of non-partisan technocratic ministers are empirically exceptional events (Improta 2022). For our article's purposes, we thus develop our hypotheses referring only to partisan ministers.

Overall, party leaders want to avoid agency loss (Lupia 2003) and, for this reason, they try very carefully to select loyal agents who will act according to their preferences once in office. These leaders screen in advance the pool of ministerial candidates, by using their individual characteristics as proxies of party reliability. The most straightforward indicator of party reliability is a minister's previous service in the party and within political institutions, because it provides information about their behavior and compliance with the party agenda. This especially holds when the political position at issue has been held for a relatively long period of time (e.g., Samuels and Shugart 2010; Kaltenegger 2022; Kaltenegger and Ennser-Jedenastik 2022; Müller-Rommel et al. 2022).

Reselection is a particular form of selection (Verge and Astudillo 2019) and, just as the set of reselected ministers is a smaller subset of those selected at least once, the set of promoted cabinet members is a subset of those reselected (Figure 1). Therefore, reselection and promotion need to be investigated as distinguished phenomena, although they are strictly related to selection (and one another).

Figure 1. Set relation between the groups of selected, reselected, and promoted cabinet ministers



Source: own elaboration.

The same factors that favor the selection of a minister may have an impact on her or his reselection and promotion, but this conclusion cannot be taken for granted. More specifically, it is plausible that to be reselected is more demanding than being selected and that to be promoted is more difficult than being simply reselected. Due to the quantitatively poor literature on ministerial reselections, we use the existing empirical literature to develop our expectations inductively.

Building upon our theoretical considerations, we argue that political experience matters when it comes to being reselected.[5] In this regard, Astudillo (2015) shows that a

[5] As some scholars have shown, political experience also determines political performance in the cabinet (Grotz et al. 2021), which, in turn, may affect reselection. Other factors might theoretically count, such as territorial origin and kinship. However, we exclude them, since they either have little effect within the

politician's anchoring in their own party is usually an important condition to be at least considered for reselection in top executive positions. More specifically, Claveria and Verge's (2015) comparison of post-ministerial careers in 23 democracies finds that political seniority is a significant drive behind ministerial reselection. At the same time, Louwerse and Van Vonno (2022) observe that party leaders value parliamentary activism when it comes to assessing the performance of their own representatives. And an MP, to be active in parliament, needs to stay in office for a sufficient amount of time. These findings are in line with the results of Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli (2017), who observe that extensive parliamentary experience and the occupation of a top party office boost one's probability of becoming minister in Italy.[6] Moreover, Verge and Astudillo (2019) remind us that holding the party leadership is a key resource to be included in subsequent cabinets.

Therefore, our first hypothesis is that:

> **H1a:** previous long parliamentary careers increase the likelihood of being reselected by one's own party in a new cabinet;
>
> **H1b:** the previous occupation of a leadership position within the party increases the likelihood of being reselected by one's own party in a new cabinet.

Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli (2017) also suggest that the core members of the executive are more frequently selected for higher offices in subsequent cabinets. On a similar note, studies on ministerial durability detect a positive relation between the occupation of a prestigious ministerial portfolio and survival in office (Hubert and Martinez-Gallardo 2008; Hansen et al. 2013; Bright et al 2015). These observations fit with the general argument that those in office enjoy an 'incumbency advantage' related to future selections (Golden and Picci 2015).

Based on these findings, our second hypothesis is that:

> **H2:** those who have held a prestigious ministerial portfolio in a previous government are more likely to be reselected by their own party in a new cabinet.

That said, there are plenty of studies showing that cabinets are gendered institutions, in that women meet less favorable career conditions than men. Although the number of women in government has sensibly grown in the most recent years in several countries and many cabinets apply a 'parity norm' (Beckwith and Franceschet 2022), women are still underrepresented and stay in office for shorter periods than their male counterparts (Fischer et al. 2012; Claveria 2014; Bright et al. 2015). Interestingly enough, cabinets are often subject to what Scherpereel et al. (2018) have called the 'see-saw effect'. This means that substantial increases in the presence of women in one cabinet are normally followed by 'backsliding' trends in the following one. Some studies suggest that this effect is likely to hold also among cabinets that are not consecutive. For example, Verge and Astudillo (2019: 733) find that party seniority matters only for men when it comes to returning to public office. Moreover, O'Brien (2015) observes that women are more likely than men to leave top political office once their party has suffered poor electoral performance.

Italian political system for the period under investigation or have become of minor importance over time (e.g., Smith 2018: 40; Tronconi and Verzichelli 2021).

[6] In Italy, ministers may be also parliamentarians, but they do not have to be.

Coherently, we expect that:

> **H3:** women are less likely than men to be reselected by their own party in a new cabinet.

Finally, it has been observed that, once entering government for the first time, it takes longer for women to reach higher prestigious positions than men (Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2021; Curtin et al. 2022). The existence of such gendered patterns of careers within cabinets leads to our fourth hypothesis:

> **H4:** women are less likely than men to be promoted to more prestigious posts when reselected by their own party to serve in a new cabinet.

Before testing these hypotheses, we elaborate on the party attributes and ministerial composition of Italian cabinets from 1994 to 2022.

3. Cabinets and Coalitions in Italy, 1994-2022

Italy has had a long track record of cabinets since the end of the Second World War. According to official counting rules, the Meloni executive (the cabinet which is in office at the time of writing) is the 68th government of the Italian Republic. Although based on various coalitional formulas, all cabinets formed during the so-called 'First Republic' were centered upon Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC), which was a pivotal party in the party system (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000). After the breakdown of the traditional party system in the early 1990s and the shift to a 'Second Republic', Italy has been characterized by instability in the party system and the frequent alternation of parties in government (Zucchini and Pedrazzani 2021).

For about two decades since 1994, center-right and center-left coalitions competed at elections and alternated in power. In particular, the center-right cabinet headed by Silvio Berlusconi in 1994 was the first Italian government to not include the DC. This government was made up of Berlusconi's Go Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI), the post-fascist National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*, AN), the regional/separatist Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN) and an ex-DC conservative segment. After Lamberto Dini's technocratic cabinet (1995-1996) and new elections, the 13th legislative term (1996-2001) featured four center-left coalition cabinets. These cabinets included the main party of the left – the Democratic Party of the Left (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, PDS), then relabeled Left Democrats (*Democratici di Sinistra*, DS) – and the center-left heir of the DC – the Italian Popular Party (*Partito Popolare Italiano*, PPI), which later on became The Daisy (*La Margherita*) – together with several minor parties (Communists, Greens, etc.). Center-right parties came back to power in the 14th legislative term (2001-2006), with two consecutive executives led again by Berlusconi, while a center-left cabinet was formed in the 15th term (2006-2008). During the life of this cabinet, which relied upon a very large and extremely heterogeneous coalition, the DS and The Daisy merged into the PD. A new center-right coalition government with Berlusconi as PM took office after the 2008 elections, including the People of Freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*, PDL) – a party resulting from the merger between FI and AN – as well as the LN and the Movement for the Autonomies (*Movimento per le Autonomie*, MPA), the latter being a moderate party with an electoral base in Southern Italy. In November 2011, the Berlusconi IV cabinet was replaced by a technocratic government headed by Mario Monti.

The inconclusive results of the elections held in February 2013 seemed to mark the 'end of bipolarism' and brought about the formation of a 'grand coalition' (Letta cabinet), which was initially supported by the PD, PDL, Monti's Civic Choice (*Scelta Civica*, SC) and the Christian democrats of the Union of the Center (*Unione di Centro*, UDC) (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2014; Di Virgilio et al. 2015; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2015). In November 2013 the PDL withdrew its support from the cabinet and relabeled itself FI, while a PDL segment remained loyal to the executive after naming itself New Center-Right (*Nuovo Centrodestra*, NCD). During the same legislative term, two other cabinets – very similar to each other – were formed in 2014 and 2016, featuring Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni as PMs (respectively) and including the PD as well as the NCD and other minor centrist parties.

The elections of March 2018 were once again the beginning of a turbulent phase (Chiaramonte et al. 2018). No party or pre-electoral coalition obtained an absolute majority of parliamentary seats, the anti-establishment M5S turned out to be the most voted party in Italy (winning as much as one-third of the popular vote), and the League surpassed for the first time its traditional coalition partner FI. After a long bargaining process, a new cabinet was sworn in in June 2018, with the M5S and the League as coalition partners and Giuseppe Conte as PM (Giannetti et al. 2018, 2022; Valbruzzi 2018). The so-called 'yellow-green' cabinet lasted for 15 months only, as a government crisis triggered by the League prompted the M5S to join the PD and the left-wing Free and Equal (*Liberi e Uguali*, LEU) into a new coalition government – Conte II cabinet – in September 2019 (Conti et al. 2020). Following tensions within the coalition, the Conte II cabinet was replaced in February 2021 by a sort of 'national unity' executive which was headed by Mario Draghi and involved all the main Italian parties except for Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FDI). Draghi's resignation in July 2022 led to early elections two months later.

Most cabinets during the 1994–2022 period relied upon legislative coalitions that were rather fragmented and quarrelsome. It can be said, however, that center-right executives were less fragmented in terms of the number of coalition members and enjoyed more stable parliamentary support if compared to center-left ones (Conti and Marangoni 2015). As we will show below, this does not imply that center-left cabinets were less stable in terms of ministerial personnel.

A particularly relevant trait of Italian executives during the Second Republic regards their size and ministerial structure: after reaching their maximum size in the 1987-1992 legislative term, Italian cabinets have gradually become smaller in terms of both the number of ministries and the overall number of ministerial departments. This has been especially true since 2001, when a single Ministry of Economy and Finance was created, and a number of other ministries were merged (Zucchini and Pedrazzani 2021).

As to patterns of portfolio allocation, since the end of the Second World War the distribution of ministerial posts has largely followed a proportionality norm (Gamson's law) among coalition parties. In this regard, it should be noted that, during the Second Republic, the degree of proportionality was particularly high for those cabinets sworn in immediately after the elections and lower for those formed later during the legislative term (Cotta and Marangoni 2015).

A further peculiarity of the cabinets of the Second Republic concerns non-partisan ministers, who were rather exceptional during the previous period. After the appointment of a technocrat-led cabinet (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014) in 1993 (Ciampi), the number of non-partisan ministers increased throughout the Second Republic. Not only did two fully technocratic executives (Dini and Monti) take office, but also the partisan cabinets have often featured a number of non-partisan figures appointed to some key ministries – above all to the Ministry of Finance. Moreover, a non-partisan policy expert has been appointed to ministries such as Justice, Labor, and Health several times. Other important portfolios – for instance, the Interior, Defense, and Foreign Affairs – have instead been assigned usually to high-ranking and long-tenured party members (Verzichelli and Cotta 2018). Finally, non-partisan appointees are rarely found in ministerial posts without a portfolio, as the latter are often created to increase the spoils to be distributed to the government parties.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1. Data and Operationalization of Variables

To test the hypotheses put forward in Section 2, we built a dataset including all the partisan cabinets that were formed in Italy during the 1994-2022 period. Our data allow us to analyze patterns of ministerial reselection in the 18th legislative term (2018-2022) and to compare them to what can be observed during the previous six terms (1994-1996, 1996-2001, 2001-2006, 2006-2008, 2008-2013, 2013-2018). On the whole, we include all the 15 partisan cabinets that took office throughout the Italian 'Second Republic'.[7]

The aim of this article is to understand what types of ministers – in terms of political experience, previous ministerial appointments and personal traits such as gender – are more likely to be reselected by their own party when the party comes back to power. To do this, a comparison is needed between the ministerial team of a given governmental party and the ministerial team of the same party in the next cabinet it participates in. Supposing that party X participates in government A and, some years later, enters government B (where A and B are either two consecutive or two non-consecutive cabinets), reselection occurs when a minister from party X appears in government A as well as in government B.[8] For instance, Roberto Castelli, a member of the Northern League who was Minister of Justice in the Berlusconi II cabinet (2001-2005), was appointed to exactly the same portfolio in the next government his party participated in (Berlusconi III, 2005-2006). Similarly, Pier Luigi Bersani – Minister of Transport and Navigation in the Amato II cabinet (2000-2001) was reselected to serve as Minister of Economic Development when his party (Left Democrats – *Democratici di Sinistra*, DS) came back to power

[7] We follow the official counting of Italian governments, according to which there is a new cabinet whenever a new ministerial team is sworn in before the head of state. We do not consider the two fully non-partisan cabinets headed by Dini (1995) and Monti (2011).

[8] Our analysis is based on comparing pairs of cabinets. Hence, if party X participates in governments A, B and C and a minister from party X holds a portfolio in all three governments, we count an instance of reselection in the A-B pair and another instance of reselection in the B-C pair. For reasons of empirical tractability, in this article we do not consider multiple (re)appointments of the same minister. To control for the possibility that the same individual appears more than once in the dataset, in our regression analysis we cluster standard errors on the minister's name (see below).

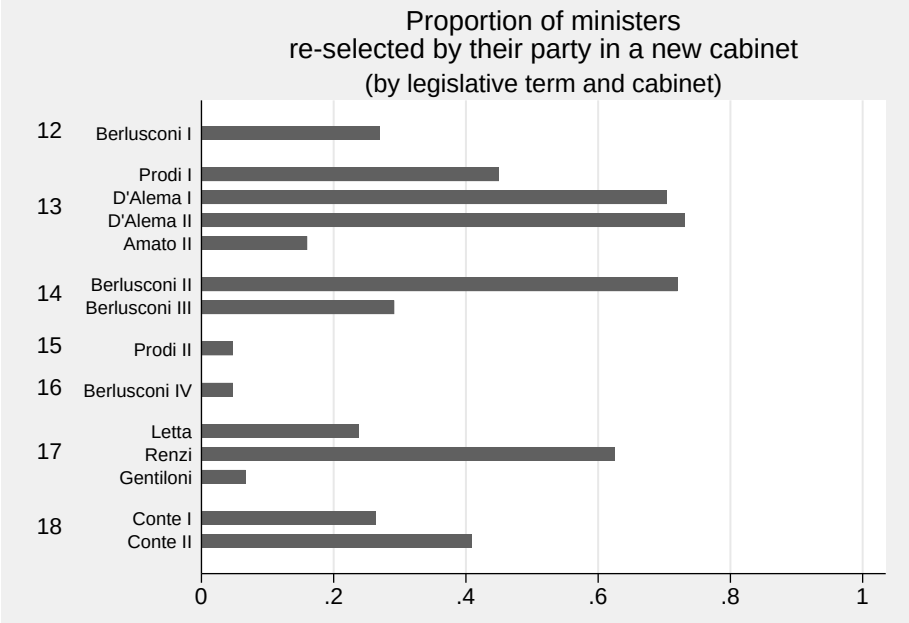
in May 2006 (Prodi II cabinet) after staying in the opposition for the entire 2001-2006 legislative term. Danilo Toninelli, who was Minister of Infrastructure and Transport in the Conte I cabinet (2018-2019), was instead not reselected as minister when his own party – the M5S – broke with the League and formed a new government (Conte II, 2019-2021) together with the PD and LEU.

Our dataset then includes the ministerial teams of those governing parties that came back to power during the 1994-2022 period.[9] As we investigate ministerial reappointment at the individual level, the unit of analysis in the data is the individual minister. The total number of observations is 308.

The main dependent variable in our analysis indicates whether a minister is reselected in the next government their party takes part in. In particular, the dummy variable *Reselected* equals 1 if a minister of cabinet A is reappointed in the next cabinet (B) where the minister's party appears (whether governments A and B are consecutive or not).[10] Conversely, this variable is 0 if a minister is not reselected by the party when this enters a new cabinet.

On average, throughout the 1994-2022 period, more than one-third of Italian ministers (37% – that is, 115 out of 308) were reselected by their own party and appointed to a cabinet post the next time the party entered government. The standard deviation around the overall mean of 0.37 is 0.48, indicating a huge variation. To explore such variation, in Figures 2 and 3 we show how the dependent variable is distributed across legislative terms and cabinets, and across parties, respectively.

Figure 2. Patterns of ministerial reselection in Italy, 1994-2022, by legislative term and cabinet



Source: own elaboration.

[9] Some Italian parties came back to office with a different name or after a party merger. For instance, FI and AN came back to government in 2008 after merging into the PDL.
[10] Prime ministers are included. Moreover, we consider all types of ministerial appointments – that is, both with portfolio and without portfolios.

Figure 2 displays the average proportion of ministers reselected by their party in a new cabinet for the different cabinets covered in this study. The graph reveals that the ministerial personnel of some governments was largely reselected by the parties in the new governments they formed afterwards. This is the case of the two executives headed by Massimo D'Alema (formed in 1998 and 1999), the Berlusconi II cabinet (2001) and the Renzi cabinet (2014). Each of these cabinets was followed by a very similar cabinet during the same legislative term, with the new cabinet resembling the previous one not only in terms of party composition, but also in terms of ministerial personnel. Indeed, the governing parties of these four cabinets reselected as ministers more than 60% (on average) of their ministerial team. In contrast, ministerial reselection was very limited (much less than 10%) in the case of the parties that were members of three cabinets: Prodi II (2006), Berlusconi IV (2008) and Gentiloni (2016). For example, if we consider the Gentiloni cabinet we note that the PM and 12 ministers belonged to the PD. Of these 13 PD members, only Dario Franceschini obtained a cabinet position when the PD came back to power in 2019 (Conte II cabinet).[11]

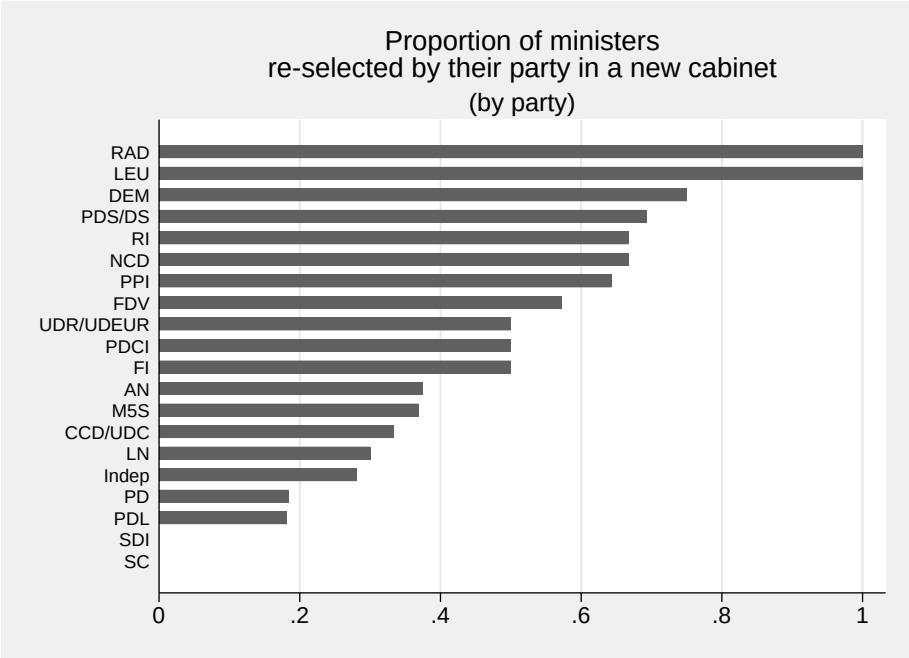
In terms of ministerial reselection, the cabinets of the 18th legislature are in between the two 'extremes' and closer to the overall mean. With regard to the Conte I executive, just one-fourth of the ministers were reappointed by their own party in the governments that followed. In particular, the M5S reselected three of its nine-person team when entering the Conte II cabinet: Giuseppe Conte (who remained PM), Luigi Di Maio (who went from being Deputy PM, Minister of Economic Development and Minister of Labor and Social Policies to being Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Alfonso Bonafede (who remained Minister of Justice). The League reselected only one of its ministers when coming back to power in the Draghi government: Erika Stefani, who was Minister of Regional Affairs and Autonomies under Conte I and Minister of Disabilities under Draghi. Moreover, the Minister of Environment Sergio Costa – a non-partisan figure at the time of the formation of the Conte I cabinet – was reappointed to the same position in the Conte II cabinet. As for the Conte II cabinet, we note that 41% of its ministerial personnel received a cabinet post in the Draghi executive. More precisely, three of the nine ministers who belonged to the PD at the time of the formation of the Conte II cabinet were reselected in the Draghi cabinet: Dario Franceschini, Lorenzo Guerini and Elena Bonetti.[12] Similarly, the M5S reappointed four of its ten ministers: Luigi Di Maio, Stefano Patuanelli, Fabiana Dadone and Federico D'Incà. In addition, the only minister from LEU (Roberto Speranza) was reappointed to the Health portfolio in the Draghi government. Finally, the independent Luciana Lamorgese was Minister of Interior in both the Conte II and the Draghi cabinet. These figures seem to indicate that, in a legislature characterized by different types of government coalitions and partial alternation in government of the three largest parties, ministerial reselection took place only to a limited extent. The M5S, the League and the PD reappointed only a few of their outgoing ministers in the next governments they participated in, presumably as a way to signal discontinuity with the prior government and to present a ministerial team that was more

[11] Franceschini was given the same ministership (Culture and Tourism) in the two cabinets. Quite interestingly, Franceschini was reselected three times by the PD, as he served as Minister of Culture in the Renzi, Gentiloni, Conte II and Draghi cabinets.

[12] Elena Bonetti actually left the PD a couple of weeks after the formation of the Conte II cabinet, when a PD faction broke with the party to become Italy Alive (Italia Viva, IV).

compatible with the 'new' coalition partners. This pattern is especially visible in the case of the M5S, which took part in all three cabinets of the 18th legislature and reappointed less than half of its ministers when turning from the Conte I to the Conte II executive and from the Conte II to the Draghi executive.

Figure 3. Patterns of ministerial reselection in Italy, 1994-2022, by party



Source: own elaboration.

Figure 3 reports the average proportion of ministers reselected by their party in a new cabinet, for the different Italian parties that were government members in the 1994-2022 period. Although there does not seem to be a clear pattern in terms of party size, we can note that two small parties are the most prone to reselecting their ministers: the radicals (RAD), which were members of the Prodi II cabinet and reselected Emma Bonino in the Letta cabinet, and LEU, which appointed Roberto Speranza in the Conte II cabinet and again in the Draghi cabinet. In contrast, two large parties such as PD and PDL reselected their ministers only to a limited extent. Quite interestingly, the main predecessor of the PD in the 1990s – the PDS, which then became DS – used to reselect its ministers much more often than the PD. Similarly, the two parties which merged into the PDL – FI and AN – reselected their ministers more than the PDL. Let us also note that two minor parties such as the Italian Social Democrats (*Socialisti Democratici Italiani*, SDI) and SC did not reselect their ministerial personnel across the cabinets they participated in (D'Alema I, Amato II and Prodi II for the former, and Letta and Renzi for the latter). As to the other parties, we observe that the M5S and the (Northern) League display a reselection record that is not far from the overall mean: 37% and 30%, respectively.

After such a descriptive account of the dependent variable, we now turn to the operationalization of the other variables included in our analysis. With regard to the independent variables, H1a and H1b posit that ministers are more likely to be reselected by their own party in a new cabinet if they have sat in parliament for a long time and if

they have been party leader in the past, respectively. To test H1a we counted the number of legislative terms that a minister spent in parliament (sitting in the Chamber of Deputies or in the Senate) before being appointed as a minister for the first time. The resulting variable is called *Parliamentary experience*. As for H1b, we created a dummy variable named *Party leader*, whose value is 1 when a minister was leader of the party in the past, and 0 otherwise.[13]

According to H2, those who have previously held a prestigious ministerial portfolio are more likely to be reappointed by their own party in a new cabinet. To test this hypothesis, we classified ministerial portfolios according to their importance and identified five top positions: Prime Ministership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Economy, and Ministry of Labor.[14] The resulting variable – the dummy *Prestigious portfolio* – equals 1 if a minister holds one of the top five cabinet positions in government A.

The last two hypotheses we formulated deal with women's chances of being reselected and promoted to more prestigious cabinet positions. To empirically evaluate H3, according to which female ministers are less likely than their male colleagues to be reselected by the own party in a new cabinet, we created a dummy called *Woman* (1 for female ministers, and 0 for male ministers). Testing H4 requires the creation of a second dependent variable. According to this hypothesis, female ministers are less likely than males to be promoted to more prestigious posts when they are reselected by their own party to serve in a new cabinet. To operationalize promotion, we created a dummy variable coded as 1 when a minister holds a non-top portfolio (see above) in cabinet A and is reselected to hold a top portfolio in the next cabinet (B) where the minister's party appears. This variable, which we call *Promoted*, is equal to 0 in all other situations.

In the analysis, we controlled for a set of factors – at the individual, party, and cabinet level – that can influence patterns of ministerial reselection. At the individual level, we introduced *Age*, which corresponds to the minister's age at the time when their party enters a new cabinet. At the party level, we took into account the fact that, all else being equal, the reselection of any minister can be particularly hard if the party controls a small number of cabinet portfolios when entering a new cabinet. We hence included *Party share*, measuring the share of cabinet posts controlled by the minister's party in the new government. Finally, at the cabinet level we accounted for the fact that a minister's reappointment becomes less and less likely to occur the longer the time between government A and government B. In particular, we incorporated the variable *Time between*, which counts the number of years between the starting year of the cabinet where the minister appears and the starting year of the next cabinet where the minister's party appears. Descriptive statistics for all the variables are provided in Table 1.

[13] We attribute 1 even if the party was different from the current one.
[14] When more than one portfolio deals with the economy (e.g., Ministry of Treasury and Ministry of Finance), we consider all these portfolios among the top portfolios. The classification of prestige portfolio is based on Bergman et al. (2021).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Dependent variables:					
Reselected	0.37	0.48	0	1	308
Promoted	0.02	0.14	0	1	308
Independent variables:					
Parliamentary experience	1.73	1.82	0	10	308
Party leader	0.12	0.33	0	1	308
Prestigious portfolio	0.24	0.43	0	1	308
Woman	0.20	0.40	0	1	308
Control variables:					
Age	56.58	10.49	33	83	308
Party share	0.29	0.19	0	0.68	308
Time between	3.32	2.33	1	10	308

Source: own elaboration.

4.2. Analysis and Results

Turning from a descriptive analysis to an explanatory one, we now present the multivariate logistic regression models that we used to test the hypotheses discussed in Section 2. In particular, we ran two logistic regression models. One with *Reselected* as dependent variable, which allows us to test H1a, H1b, H2 and H3 (Model 1). And one with *Promoted* as dependent variable, allowing us to test H4 (Model 2). While Model 1 uses all the observations in our dataset, Model 2 uses a subsample of the data (that is, only those ministers who are reselected in the next cabinet where their party participates). In both models, standard errors are clustered on the minister's name. Coefficients are reported in Table 2. Note that coefficients are expressed as odds ratios, where the odd is defined as the probability that an event – in our case, reselection or promotion of a minister – will occur, divided by the probability that the event will not occur. The odds ratio compares two odds, computed at different covariate values. In the table, the odds ratios indicate how the probability of reselection (or promotion) changes for a one-unit change in the independent variable of interest.

Starting from Model 1, it can be noted that our first two hypotheses are supported by the data on Italian cabinets in the 1994-2022 period. In particular, a minister's probability of being reselected by their own party to serve as minister in a new cabinet increases if the minister has a long parliamentary career (H1a) and if they have been leader of the party in the past (H1b). More precisely, an odds ratio of 1.162 on *Parliamentary experience* indicates that each additional legislative term spent in parliament before a first ministerial appointment increases a minister's chance of being reselected by their own party in a new cabinet by 16%. At the same time, having served as party leader in the past

more than doubles a minister's chance of being reselected in a new government the next time the party comes back to power.[15]

Table 2. Determinants of ministers' reselection and promotion in Italy, 1994-2022.

	Model 1 (reselection)		**Model 2 (promotion)**	
Parliamentary experience	1.150	*	2.295	**
	(0.086)		(0.936)	
Party leader	2.249	**	2.203	
	(0.905)		(1.879)	
Prestigious portfolio	1.332			
	(0.472)			
Woman	0.891		0.318	
	(0.305)		(0.417)	
Age	0.960	***	0.936	
	(0.012)		(0.088)	
Party share	0.898		2.409	
	(0.693)		(8.800)	
Time between	0.749	***	1.673	
	(0.050)		(0.584)	
Constant	9.835	***	0.031	
	(6.809)		(0.090)	
Number of observations	308		115	
Log pseudolikelihood	-181.72		-16.31	

Notes: Logistic regression models with standard errors clustered on ministers' name. Table entries are odds ratios, with standard errors in parentheses. Statistical significance: * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.
Source: own elaboration.

Our analysis does not lend support to H2 and H3, as the coefficients on *Prestigious portfolio* and *Woman* in Model 1 do not reach standard levels of statistical significance. This implies that the probability of being reappointed as minister in a new cabinet does not depend on the prestige of the portfolio held or on the minister's gender.

With regard to H4, the logistic regression of Model 2 focuses on those ministers that have been reselected by their own party to serve in a new cabinet and tests whether women are less likely than men to be promoted to more prestigious posts. The coefficient on *Woman* is not statistically significant, indicating that women are not less likely than men to be promoted to more prestigious posts when reselected in a new cabinet.

As for the control variables we included, *Age* and *Time between* are found to be statistically significant. More specifically, ministers become less and less likely to be reselected when they get older: a minister's chance of being reappointed by their party in a new cabinet decreases by roughly 4% for every year that passes. Moreover,

[15] In analyses we do not report here, we checked if chances of reappointment are higher for those cabinet members who are also leader of their own party at the moment of their possible reselection as ministers. Results show that this is not the case, implying that what increases the likelihood of reselection is more a politician's career within the party than current status as party leader. We must note that incumbent ministers who are also party leaders at the time of their possible reappointment are very few.

unsurprisingly, reselection chances decrease as time passes between the moment when a minister is in office and the moment when they can be reappointed by their own party in a future cabinet: all else being equal, each additional year reduces reselection changes by 25%. In contrast, the share of cabinet posts controlled by the minister's party in the new government (*Party share*) does not seem to affect ministers' reselection chances.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we investigated the extent to which Italian political parties tend to reselect the same ministers across different political executives. Moreover, we tried to detect what makes some ministers more likely than others to be selected by their respective party heads in more than one cabinet. From a theoretical viewpoint, we adopted a principal-agent perspective, arguing that some personal characteristics are particularly important in determining the outcome. First, we hypothesized that remarkable political experiences within the parliament and the party as well as previous cabinet experience in a prestigious ministerial portfolio increase one's chances to be reselected. Second, we expected women – due to the gendered character of political careers and executive institutions – to be less likely than men to be reappointed and promoted to more prestigious cabinet positions. We tested these conjectures on all Italian partisan cabinets from 1994 to 2022.

The results do not support our arguments for the linkages between gender, portfolio prestige, and reselection or promotion. At the same time, we found that – similarly to what happens with first selections – political experience is a key criterion that party principals take into consideration when it comes to choosing the ministerial team. An experienced minister is, in fact, someone who has already had the opportunity to demonstrate reliability and loyalty towards the party; moreover, the minister will be likely to have acquired enough skills to perform in office. Interestingly enough, the seat share of the party within a coalition does not have a significant impact on reselection, while age and time between two cabinets have a negative effect.

The lack of significant effect of the portfolio prestige on our main dependent variable may actually be an indicator that party principals value party reliability *per se*, irrespective of the type of previous cabinet post. In other words, they use a minister's prior experience within the parliament and in the party to assess their adherence to the party agenda and to have a proxy of future behavior. In a nutshell, a minister can be a reliable party agent either in a prestigious or in a less prestigious portfolio. The rejection of the two gender-related hypotheses, in turn, would suggest that the major existing obstacles to gender parity within cabinets emerge before breaking the 'glass ceiling'; in this phase, party gate-keeping may be particularly effective in limiting access to positions from where one can prove to be 'fit for the job'.

With regard to the reselection patterns, the 18th legislative term is a particular case, in that it includes three cabinets characterized by partial party alternation yet with significant ideological heterogeneity. Compared to other terms where the same parties came back to power immediately after the fall of the previous executive, the 18th term shows lower levels of ministerial continuity. A possible explanatory factor is the relative high variation in the coalition partners' policy positions from one cabinet to another. In this regard, Bäck and Carroll (2020: 330-331) have pointed out that the choice of a

minister may be dependent not only on intra-party factors, but also on how coalition partners evaluate a portfolio, and whether or not they like the political profiles in the ally's pool of candidates. Therefore, the same party – say, the M5S – in different cabinets may have had to change its ministers depending on the ideological orientation of the partners, in order to find a general agreement on portfolio allocation.

Future research could extend the focus of the analysis and provide cross-country comparisons. Besides providing more generalizable findings, this would allow assessment of the possible conditional effect of country-specific institutional variables. Moreover, scholars could introduce further individual-based variables, whose impact seems plausible. For example, other types of political experiences at sub-national and supranational level could be taken into account. Future studies would also greatly benefit from introducing sturdy operationalizations of ministerial performance in office and from consequent analyses of how this performance affects a minister's career outlooks.

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The Italian welfare reform trajectory in turbulent times.
Income support, family and pension policy during the XVIII parliamentary term

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Abstract

Absolutely exceptional in many respects, the XVIII parliamentary term represented a peculiar terrain for welfare reform. On the one side, over the past five years, three highly heterogeneous governments have alternated in power, supported by different coalitions, each the result of demanding negotiations and alliances between parties, within a moving political landscape. On the other side, the legislature has been heavily affected by the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 health emergency and its harsh social and economic consequences. Despite the complexity of the scenario and the internal frictions experienced by the three short-lived cabinets, since 2018 important reforms have been enacted in key welfare sectors, marking in some cases a break with the previous institutional legacy. The paper aims to critically examine the trajectory of welfare reforms during the last parliamentary term, shedding light on how they have been shaped through time by a combination of external turbulences and political constraints. Adopting a historical institutionalist approach, the analysis focuses on the transformations which have occurred in key social policy areas – anti-poverty policy and income support, family policy and pensions – in order to examine the major innovations and shifts occurring under the three cabinets, featuring such diverse electoral bases and ideological stances.

1. Introduction

Absolutely exceptional in many respects, the XVIII parliamentary term represented a peculiar terrain for welfare reforms. The five-year legislature witnessed the alternation in power of three heterogeneous governments, supported by different coalitions that formed after demanding negotiations between political parties in a rapidly changing environment, affected since 2020 by the dramatic Covid-19 health emergency and its socioeconomic consequences.

Despite such unprecedented challenges and the frequent internal frictions, the three cabinets managed to pass important reforms in key welfare areas, marking at times a substantial break with the previous institutional legacy.

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Against this backdrop, the paper critically examines the trajectory of welfare reforms during the last parliamentary term, shedding light on how they have been shaped through time by a combination of external turbulences and unlikely political constraints, from the naissance of the 'yellow-green coalition government', the populist alliance between the Lega (L) and Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), through the yellow-red coalition, led by M5S and the Partito Democratico (PD), to the multi-coloured technocrat-led unity government headed by Mario Draghi, supported by all the parties but for Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). In order to examine major innovations and possible shifts occurring under the three cabinets that featured very diverse electoral bases and ideological stances, the article employs a historical-institutionalist approach, focusing on the transformations taking place in key social policy areas – namely anti-poverty policy and income support, family policy and pensions.[1]

In so doing, the article contributes to the scholarly debate about the recalibration of the Italian welfare state, asking how far these reforms have helped to move the country beyond a partially frozen landscape (cf. Palier and Martin, 2007), long characterized by distinctive functional and distributive distortions (Ferrera, 2019; Ferrera and Hemerijck 2003; Jessoula and Locatelli 2009). Remarkably, functional distortions arise from deeply-rooted imbalances in the internal allocation of social spending, biased in favour of the elderly. Comparatively, a broader share of resources has traditionally been absorbed to protect against longevity and survivorship risks, i.e., through the pension system; whereas other welfare functions – such as catering for the family and children and insuring against unemployment, social exclusion and poverty – have been rather neglected. Furthermore, cash transfers largely prevail, towering over the modest efforts in the provision of in-kind social services. Besides, the distributive distortion intersects the functional one, and refers to the gaps in the protection granted (in terms of coverage, requirements to access benefits and their generosity) across occupational categories and social groups, which have resulted in segmentation between insiders, who enjoy high protection against a wide range of risks, and outsiders (Jessoula, Graziano, Madama, 2010). These include individuals only weakly tied to the formal labour market, such as atypical employees, the long-term unemployed, and those employed in the informal sector, only marginally or poorly protected.

Drawing on well-established historical-institutionalist theoretical frameworks, we develop different expectations regarding the trajectories of the three policy fields. According to classical works on welfare state retrenchment, or, better on the possibility to reform social policy in the 'age of permanent austerity' characterised by public budget constraints, Pierson (1998) posits that mature (mostly, insurance-based) welfare state areas will elicit greater resistance by beneficiaries and the involved interest groups compared to underdeveloped ones. In a similar vein, Bonoli (2012) argues that decision-making strategies involving affordable credit claiming can be fruitfully applied to policy fields that cost comparatively less, compared to encompassing social insurance benefits, and that do not cater to established constituencies. Considering the distributional

[1] The selection of policy fields was driven by the importance attributed to these sectors by the recalibration framework (Ferrera and Hemerijck 2003). For this reason, we do not include here policy changes occurring in the field of healthcare which, nonetheless, in recent decades has been subject to major cuts made even more evident during the recent pandemic crisis (Guillèn et al. 2022).

conflicts highlighted above, it becomes clear how pensions, which traditionally absorbed the vast majority of Italian social policy resources, have a limited potential to be either retrenched or significantly expanded as institutional change may occur only 'at the margin' (Myles and Pierson 2001), vis-à-vis social assistance and family policies. The latter display totally different political and institutional dynamics, being both less costly and long neglected areas throughout the history of the Italian welfare state development. Hence, we maintain that path-departure is more likely to happen in the latter two domains and is much less probable for insurance against old age.

The article is structured as follows. Sections 2, 3 and 4 outline the reforms that have occurred in three main policy fields: Section 2 focuses on labour market reforms and anti-poverty policies, Section 3 deals with the main novelties in the area of family policy and work-family balance, Section 4 provides an overview of the changes in pension policy. Section 5 concludes by discussing the overall trajectory of reforms in light of their possible contribution to the recalibration of the Italian welfare model along the functional and distributive axes.

2. Labour market and anti-poverty policies

In the aftermath of the March 2018 general election, the Italian labour market displayed distinctive features: very low work intensity, due to a comparatively limited number of good quality permanent jobs available and low levels of female and youth labour-force participation, stagnating wages, and a high incidence of informal and precarious employment (Ferrera, 2022; Tassinari, 2022). In the previous legislature, a three-decade trajectory of labour market de-regulation culminated in the adoption of the so-called Jobs Act, which combined the relaxation of dismissal for workers on open-ended contracts with the expansion of unemployment benefits, targeting in particular labour market outsiders (Picot and Tassinari, 2017; Sacchi, 2019). This did not result, however, in a significant boost of employment nor in reduced labour market segmentation (Giuliani and Madama, 2023), which actually remained pervasive since new types of low quality 'cheap' atypical contracts spread and the social condition of many solo-self-employed people critically deteriorated.

Such labour market features, along with the peculiarity of the Italian welfare system, contributed to the dramatic rise of poverty and social exclusion in Italy in the post-Great Recession decade (Gori, 2017; Madama et al., 2014; Saraceno et al., 2020). According to the Italian National Statistics Office, in 2006, in the pre-crisis scenario, the absolute poverty rate was 2.9 per cent; it almost tripled in the following years, reaching 8.4 per cent in 2018, corresponding to more than 5 million people. To respond to this alarming social trend, in 2017 the centre-left Gentiloni government introduced an anti-poverty programme, the Inclusion Income (*Reddito d'inclusione*, REI), finally overcoming the most visible comparative weakness of the Italian social protection system, that is, the absence of a national minimum income scheme (Jessoula and Natili, 2020). Some features of REI made the programme peculiar in comparative perspective: indeed, it was one of the least generous and inclusive minimum income schemes in Europe (Natili, 2020). Due to severe budgetary constraints, only a limited number of poor individuals could receive this benefit, which was also very meagre – equal to EUR 187.5, i.e., just 23.7 per cent of the relative poverty line, for single member households. Furthermore, strict

duration limits, constraints on beneficiaries' discretion in the use of the monetary component as well as a pervasive sanctioning system led experts to question the effectiveness of REI in actually 'empowering' the poor (Granaglia, 2018).

Against such a backdrop, the yellow-green Conte I government (M5S-L) promised to change the direction of labour market and income protection reforms. In the Contract for the government of change, signed by the M5S and the Lega, it is stated that "*Particular attention will be paid to combating precariousness, caused also by the 'jobs act', in order to build more stable labour relations and allow families a more serene planning of their future.*" The same document also identifies the introduction of a new minimum income scheme called 'Citizenship Income' (*Reddito di cittadinanza,* RdC) as a priority of the new government's action. This was not surprising, considering that the M5S was the coalition leader (in light of the higher share of parliamentary seats vis-à-vis the Lega) and strengthening minimum income protection was the *pièce de résistance* in M5S's programmatic agenda. Thus, a few months after the establishment of the Conte I government, Law Decree No 4/2019 introduced the Citizenship Income, replacing REI from April 2019. Although the name recalls the idea of a universal unconditional basic income, the Italian RdC is a minimum income scheme – a monetary benefit targeting poor households conditional on participation in job-search activities – not so different from those already introduced in all other EU-28 member states. Compared to REI, RdC is endowed with greater budgetary resources, it is more generous, inclusive, and with less strict duration limits. In 2020, resources allocated to RdC amounted to 0.43 per cent of GDP, and coverage was relatively broad in comparative terms, around 5.1 per cent of the total population (Jessoula et al., 2021). Relevantly, the new RdC maintained the uniform national standards for the provision of integrated social services for the poor introduced with the previous Inclusion Income,[2] while also investing additional resources for active labour market policies (ALMPs).

Despite these unquestionable merits, scholars have highlighted some of RdC's shortcomings (Gallo and Raitano, 2019; Gori, 2020; Natili et al., 2022). In order to reach an agreement with the Lega (Jessoula and Natili, 2020; Landini, 2021), eligibility conditions for immigrants were significantly tightened: indeed, the ten-year residence requirement and the obligation to provide detailed certificates about their wealth in the countries of origin exclude many poor immigrants from RdC provision. Second, a very strong workfare activation profile was introduced, a feature that contrasts with Italy's persistently limited labour demand, especially in southern regions. Finally, in order to increase the number of beneficiaries without expanding costs, the government introduced an equivalence scale for computing the RdC amount that favours single member households, whereas it is detrimental for large families, thus providing relatively fewer resources to poor children (Saraceno, 2019).

[2] At the same time, it is important to underline that some of the innovations that followed the introduction of the Citizenship Income are detrimental to the provision of integrated services to the poor (Gori, 2019). Indeed, the REI had envisaged that social services had to manage access to the measure and define the type of inclusion path ('simple' or 'complex'; devoted to 'social' or 'labour' inclusion). Conversely, with the new Citizenship Income, local social services are no longer the 'single point of access' and local social workers no longer carry out pre-assessment in order to design a household-specific social and/or labour inclusion path. Moreover, there are no adequate coordination methods between municipalities and PES, and effective guidance allowing families to orient themselves in the local 'social system' is lacking, generating a 'fragmented' social inclusion system (Gori, 2019).

Along with the introduction of the RdC, the yellow-green government adopted a reform of employment-protection legislation (EPL) sponsored by M5S, the 'Dignity Decree', which reduced the maximum number of renewals allowed for temporary contracts and marginally increased monetary compensation in cases of unfair dismissal for open-ended contracts (Bulfone and Tassinari, 2022). Overall, these welfare reforms constituted significant changes compared to the social and labour market policies promoted in the previous decades. While the Citizenship Income finally put an end to Italian exceptionalism, as a fully-fledged minimum income scheme with no budgetary constraints eventually institutionalized minimum income protection in Italy (Jessoula and Natili 2020), the introduction of the Dignity Decree (partially) interrupted a three-decade-long trajectory of labour market deregulation.

The coalition government of the M5S and the Lega was short-lived. Frictions between the two parties led to the formation of a new government coalition between the M5S and the PD, in charge from September 2019 until January 2021. The labour market and social policies of this government were dramatically affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The government's response relied, on the one hand, on existing social protection schemes – the main unemployment protection scheme NASPI (*Nuova prestazione di Assicurazione Sociale per l'Impiego*), the Citizenship Income and especially the short time work compensation scheme CIG (*Cassa Integrazione Guadagni*). On the other hand, several measures were introduced (and often extended) by a series of government decrees aimed at cushioning the social impact of the crisis by providing protection to workers against income shortfalls resulting from protracted lockdowns.

Overall, the most consistent interventions concerned employment retention and were characterised by heavy reliance on short-time work schemes to protect firms and employees. The emergency packages also introduced new income support benefits for workers not otherwise covered: workers in a continuous and coordinated collaboration agreement (the most common form of bogus self-employment in Italy), the self-employed, seasonal workers, and workers in the entertainment industry. Although they included many groups of non-standard workers, these ad hoc provisions were not particularly generous and maintained the typical fragmentation and complexity of the Italian system (Jessoula et al., 2021).

Furthermore, a few groups of workers were excluded from these emergency measures: some categories of seasonal and intermittent workers, unemployed people who were no longer eligible for unemployment benefits before the emergency, poor migrants and informal workers. The need to protect these households in need could have been met either by expanding the RdC through the relaxation of the conditions for entitlement, or by introducing a new means-tested benefit. The government preferred the second option, and in the so-called 'Decreto Rilancio' (Decree No. 34/2020 of 19 May) introduced the Emergency Income (*Reddito di emergenza*, REM), a less generous, residual and temporary safety net for poor households who could not access the RdC (Natili et al., 2022a). To contain the dramatic rise of material needs, the government and the regions launched emergency initiatives aimed at temporarily addressing the economic difficulties of poor tenants, thus avoiding the risk of eviction, without, however, solving any of the multiple structural problems of housing policies in Italy (Jessoula et al., 2021).

In a nutshell, the Italian government reacted to the Covid-19 crisis by expanding its income-maintenance protection schemes. At the same time, it returned to its traditional model, prioritising well-established insider-biased policies, such as short-term work, while granting a patchier response and delays in guaranteeing economic support to the outsiders (Natili et al., 2022b). Moreover, with the exception of ISCRO (*Indennità straordinaria di continuità reddituale e operativa*), the extraordinary allowance aimed at guaranteeing income and operational continuity to a small category of the self-employed, introduced as a pilot scheme for three years (2021-2023), all other measures were short-term. Overall, and differently from other countries such as Spain, during the Covid-19 pandemic the Italian government did not introduce structural measures, so that the main weaknesses in labour and social policy remained in place. Mounting tensions between the centrist Italia Viva (IV) and the M5S over the allocation of Next Generation EU funds led to the resignation of the Conte II government and the formation of a coalition government led by Mario Draghi (Guidi and Moschella, 2021; Domorenok and Guardiancich, 2022). The new government finalised the drafting of the Italian National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP), officially handed over to the European Commission in April 2021. In line with the social investment paradigm promoted by EU institutions (Ferrera, 2017), the plan focuses on financing childcare, ALMPs and social services, and reducing the traditional cash-transfer bias that characterises the Italian welfare system (Madama, 2010). Overall, while investing in several underfinanced social policy areas, there is continuity in the supply-side approach to labour market policies, in that the plan focuses on activating and training workers rather than creating jobs or reducing labour market fragmentation (Tassinari, 2022). In other words, the NRRP does not address some of the longstanding structural weaknesses mentioned above: low work intensity, low wages, labour market segmentation and little protection for those with a weaker labour market attachment. Indeed, some proposals to tackle these issues, like the minimum wage or the reform of a short-time work compensation scheme in a universal direction (with the aim of covering atypical workers), were not included in the final version of the NRRP (Mirò et al., 2022).

Beyond the drafting of the Italian NRRP, the Draghi government intervened in the anti-poverty field with the Budget Law for 2022 (Law no. 234/2021). Indeed, in March 2021, the Minister of Labour, Orlando, announced that the bureaucratic mechanisms of the RdC would be assessed and revised. To this end, a committee composed of experts chaired by sociologist Chiara Saraceno was set up, which by October 2021 came up with ten policy proposals on how to improve the design of RdC in order to make it more equitable and effective, in particular by relaxing its access requirements (for migrants especially), supporting families with children and encouraging employment through tax breaks (Saraceno et al., 2021). The Draghi government, however, decided to tread a different path, thereby ignoring the main issues highlighted by the Saraceno Committee (Gori 2021). The main changes to the RdC, then, included stricter conditionality for beneficiaries and meagre links to ALMPs, with the aim of reducing the disincentives to job search. In other words, in line with a neo-liberal approach to anti-poverty benefits, 'negative activation' prevailed.

3. Family policies

The XVIII legislature marked important transformations in the sphere of family policies too, interrupting a long cycle of substantial institutional and political inertia. Notably, the major innovations were passed during the second part of the legislature, under the lead of the yellow-red coalition (the Conte II government), and under the technocrat-led unity government headed by Mario Draghi. Changes concerned all the three core areas of family policy, namely: childcare services, thanks to the investment planned within the framework of the NRRP and the setting of national thresholds in minimum levels of service provision; parental leave, through the further extension of the compulsory paternity leave, in line with the requirements envisaged by the 2019 EU directive on work-life balance (Directive (EU) 2019/1158); and, remarkably, child allowances, with the introduction of the Single Universal Allowance (*Assegno unico e universale*, AUU).

As regards childcare services, the most important intervention came late in the parliamentary term and corresponds to the investments passed under the Draghi government in the context of the Italian NRPP. As highlighted in Section 2, the third government of the parliamentary term revised and finalized the drafting of the NRRP, submitted in April 2021, boosting a social investment-oriented plan, thereby prioritizing childcare, ALMPs and social services. More in depth, the NRRP targeted approximately 4.6 billion euros to the extension of childcare facilities for children aged 0-6, as one of its flagships, with an expected growth of 228,000 childcare places by 2026. Coherently with these objectives, the Budget Law for 2022 allocated resources – as part of the national strategy to increase levels of service provision – with the aim of reaching an overall coverage of at least 33 per cent of the 0-3 population for each municipality or territorial area by 2027. Funds are to be distributed on the basis of a strict monitoring system and starting from municipalities with lower coverage rates (less than 28.88 per cent). Further, resources are planned to grow from 120 million in 2022 up to 1,100 million annually starting from 2027 (175 million in 2023, 230 million in 2024, 300 million in 2025, 450 million in 2026 and 1,100 million from 2027 onwards). Starting from a coverage rate stuck at 26 per cent at the national level – yet with very large variations, from 9.3 per cent in the Campania region to 38.6 per cent in the Lazio region – such an investment is meant to imply an increase in access to childcare facilities for children aged 0-3 from the current 312,000 places in either public or private services, to 454,000 (Minzyuk and Stradiotto, 2022).

Turning to cash transfers, the most important reform, the AUU, was framed under the Conte II government but approved under the cabinet led by Draghi, as part of the so-called Family Act. The latter was a broader package of measures aimed at reorganizing the system of family and work-life balance policies, representing one of the flagship measures sponsored by Matteo Renzi's IV party, and championed by Elena Bonetti, Family Minister both under the Conte II and the Draghi government (therefore from September 2019 to October 2022).[3] Through the Delegation Law of April 2021 (Law no. 46/2022), the government was in fact required to adopt, within 12 months, one or more

[3] The Family Act was passed in the form of a Delegation law in April 2022 (Law no. 32/2022). Its concrete implementation will depend, therefore, on subsequent implementation laws, except for the AUU, which followed a different path, via a dedicated law anticipating its entry into force.

legislative decrees *'aimed at reorganising, simplifying and strengthening'* child allowances. The implementing act was passed a few months later, in December 2021.

The main goal of the AUU is to simplify and rationalize the plethora of existing measures to support the costs of raising children, overcoming some of the disparities that have long characterized the Italian model. The new scheme has in fact replaced various benefits including birth or adoption bonuses, child allowances, birth allowances (baby bonus) and tax deductions, setting a unified allowance, which covers from the 7th month of pregnancy up to the age of 21 (under certain conditions) and without age limits for disabled children.[4] The monthly amount ranges from a maximum of 175 euros per child for low-income families up to a minimum of 50 euros per underage child for those on higher incomes. In addition, top-ups are foreseen for families with more than three children or having children with disabilities, for young mothers and in the event that both parents are employed.

Totalling about 18 billion per year (MEF, 2022), of which 6.8 billion comes from additional fiscal resources, the new AUU concerned about 7.2 million families, with 77 per cent of the children covered by the reform expected to benefit from a net increase in transfers, 672 euros on average, with a significant progressiveness in favour of low-income families (UpB, 2022). Thanks to its design – in particular universal coverage, type of financing, and the generosity of the benefits combined with the different progressiveness of the amounts and top up – the new scheme overcomes, in fact, some of the distributive disparities and coverage gaps of the previous model, based on two main programmes, namely the household allowances and tax deductions for dependent children (UpB, 2022). The former was in fact a categorial measure, targeting employees only and income-tested,[5] whereas tax deductions de facto excluded families in situations of major need, i.e., those with a yearly income of less than 8,000 euros, as they fell within the no-tax area.

Finally, and differently from the intervention on the two other areas of family policy, the extension of paternity leave can be seen as part of an incremental process, beginning in 2012 with the labour market reform enacted by the Monti government (Law no. 92/2022). More precisely, the reform introduced for the years 2013-2015 a compulsory pilot leave (of one day) and an optional leave alternative to the maternity leave (of two days) for employed fathers in the private sector, during the first five months of the child's life. In 2015, the compulsory paternity leave was then extended by increasing its duration to two days; and then further increased to four days for 2017-2018, augmented to five days in 2019, then seven days in 2020. The Budget Law for 2021 (Law no. 178/2020) further increased the number to 10, while the Budget Law for the year 2022 (Law no. 234/2021) stabilized the leave, which therefore lost its experimental character.

How far are these measures affecting the Italian traditional model of family policies, that has long remained, echoing Naldini and Saraceno (2008), far from structural reforms? The overview offered above shows that during the XVIII legislature, albeit with considerable delay compared to other European countries, family policies in Italy experienced, partly at least, the transition from a frozen landscape to structural reforms (cf.

[4] The previous system is maintained for dependent relatives aged over 21, including tax deductions for dependent children.

[5] More precisely to households with an income coming for at least 70 per cent from wages (or pensions of previous wage earners) and funded via social contributions.

Palier and Martin, 2007). A neat expansion occurred in the funds devoted to family policies, affecting both coverage and benefit generosity, enriched through significant innovations. In this novel scenario, the reform of child allowances is undoubtedly the most far-reaching intervention, not only for the additional resources made available, but above all for its path-shifting scope with respect to the pre-existing policy structure in terms of distributive outcomes (Madama and Mercuri, 2022; Naldini and Saraceno, 2022). Besides this, the investments in childcare facilities may in the medium term counterbalance the deeply-rooted cash-transfer bias. Lastly, on the side of parental leave, the extension of paternity leave to ten days, although possibly relevant from a cultural standpoint, is more a kind of symbolic top-up, unable to offset gender disparities in the fruition of care leaves.

In sum, even though comparative social spending data still fails to capture recent changes, the yellow-red coalition and the technocrat-led unity government shaped reforms aimed at strengthening long-neglected welfare functions in the field of family policy, and social groups – including in particular underage children, over 1.4 million of whom lived in absolute poverty in 2021, i.e., one out of seven – and which, not surprisingly, were more dramatically affected by the Great Recession and by the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether these reforms will also offset the alarming and long-lasting decline in fertility rates while supporting employment, especially for women, which are currently two of the major challenges the country has to cope with, needs a longer time horizon to be appreciated.

4. Pensions

With regard to old-age pensions, the XVIII parliamentary term continued treading the 'new path' inaugurated by the previous centre-left governments, especially the ones led by Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, aimed at tackling two main challenges befalling the Italian retirement system. First, as a result of previous reform rounds during and immediately after the sovereign debt crisis (2009-11), the pensionable age and early retirement contributory requirements have risen rapidly and significantly. This has generated problems of retirement duration and difficulties arising from the interplay between expected longer working lives, the insufficient absorption capacity of labour markets for older workers and the chronic underdevelopment of social services, often filled through domestic care carried out by retired women. Second, despite Italy being the second highest pension spender in the EU, its retirement system only limitedly shields pensioners against the risk of poverty in old age, resulting in an uneven distribution of pension incomes, increasing pension inequality and a marked gender gap. Thus, Jessoula and Raitano (2019) consider this 'new path' a reaction against previous cost containment measures, consisting of *'measures aimed at relaxing the eligibility requirements for (early) retirement with measures designed to support low-income pensioners.'*

Fundamentally the interventions during the XVIII parliamentary turn boiled down to two: i) the Di Maio-Salvini reform in 2019 (Law Decree No. 4/2019), and ii) the minor adjustments introduced by Mario Draghi's Budget Law of 2022 (Law No. 234/21).

The former consisted of two innovations: the 'citizenship' and the 'quota 100' pensions.[6] The citizenship pension (*Pensione di cittadinanza*) was introduced by the M5S as a complement to the new minimum income scheme (the already-mentioned RdC), with which it shares several features and flaws. The anti-poverty measure is a means-tested benefit for people aged 67 and above who have resided in Italy for at least 10 years and who earn less than EUR 9,360 in annual equivalised income. The individual monthly benefit was EUR 630, plus EUR 150 for housing.

More important for the pensions section is the early retirement 'quota 100', which drew criticism from the European Commission, contributed to a spike in the spread between Italian and German bond yields, was later revised by the Draghi government, but, at the same time, helped Salvini's Lega to its best electoral result during the EP elections in 2019.

'Quota 100' was a pilot measure lasting three years (2019-21), available to private and public sector employees starting from, respectively, April and August 2019. People aged at least 62 and having 38 years of contributions[7] were allowed to retire before reaching both the legislated pensionable age and the contributory period for early retirement. Pension payments begin three months after the criteria are met (six months for public employees). Unlike the standard pensionable age, the 'quota 100' requirement is not linked to changes in life expectancy. The early retirement scheme does not involve a reduction in benefits or require occupational hardship criteria to be met. A minimal disincentive is the prohibition of earning additional income from work worth EUR 5,000 per year or more – implying the re-emergence of a social insurance principle in fashion between 1980-2000, i.e., the attempt to restrain early retirement by means of introducing incentives and disincentives (Jessoula, 2009). Public employees get a (small) additional perk: severance payments continue to be made in accordance with the seniority requisites of pre-existing legislation, as if the retiree were still employed.

'Quota 100' legislation fulfilled one of the electoral promises that were inserted in the Lega's 2018 electoral manifesto, whose main aim, among others, was to partly cancel the begrudged 2011 Fornero pension reform, which eliminated several early exit options. 'Quota 100' was designed by Lega deputy labour minister Claudio Durigon, previously deputy general secretary of the right-wing trade union UGL (*Unione Generale del Lavoro*). The union had entered a close alliance with the Lega in 2018, thus providing some labour support to a party often siding with business organisations. Apart from this input, the policy's adoption was not done in concert with social partners.

As detailed by Brambilla and Gazzoli (2020) both the initial cost and take-up were lower than those predicted by the parliamentary budgetary office. Whereas Alfonso and Bulfone (2019: 248) described potential claimants as *'male workers from Northern regions like Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna who started working early*

[6] Other measures not dealt with in this article were: i) the suspension, until 2027, of the automatic linkage of the contributory years for early retirement to changes in life expectancy, fixed at 42 years 10 months for men and 41 years and 10 months for women; ii) confirmation of the 'woman's option' pension, which allows early retirement for women who choose a purely notional defined contributions (NDC) pension calculation formula; iii) extension of the 'social APE' (*anticipo pensionistico*) pension. The latter two were extended through the Budget Law for 2022 until the end of 2022.

[7] Given the stipulation of two minimum thresholds, this is not a 'quota' in the sense of a share whose value can be obtained using diverse combinations of age and seniority. It is just a name given to the sum of two minimum thresholds.

with a stable contract', actual claimants were concentrated among public sector employees in the southern regions. As with many other social policy measures of the yellow-green Conte I government, this measure favoured male over female workers (Meardi and Guardiancich, 2022). The Lega almost doubled its vote at the 2019 EP elections and, unsurprisingly, its rise in popularity was primarily in the south and among public employees (Ipsos, 2019).

Without entering into excessive detail, the reversal of the Fornero pension reforms attracted the ire of the European Commission, which, rather laconically, included among its Country-Specific Recommendations for 2019 and 2020, which have to be fulfilled within the subsequent NRRP drafted in 2021, the need to fully implement past pension reforms (Domorenok and Guardiancich, 2022). Additionally, the huge budget overruns, partly imputable to 'quota 100' and the citizenship pension, led to a rise in sovereign bond yields, as predicted by the theory (see Guardiancich and Guidi, 2022).

In order to partially backtrack, the Budget Law of 2022 under premier Mario Draghi, replaced 'quota 100' with 'quota 102', a slightly more restrictive early exit option, which allows retirement to workers who fulfil combined contributory (38 years) and age (64 years) requirements. 'Quota 102' was in force until the end of 2022. If it keeps being renewed alongside the other derogation to the Fornero pension reforms it may generate additional pension spending worth 0.23 per cent of Italian GDP annually until the year 2034 (Ragioneria generale dello stato, 2022: 83).

5. Conclusions and discussion

In this article, we analysed the policy trajectory of the Italian welfare state during the turbulent XVIII parliamentary term, through a careful investigation of social policy reforms in three crucial policy fields: family, pensions, labour market and anti-poverty policies. Although in some respects one may argue that in the course of the legislature labour and income support policies turned to more traditional tracks, the legislature brought about the introduction of a minimum income scheme (the RdC), finally overcoming one of the main weaknesses of the Italian welfare state, the lack of a safety net guaranteeing income protection to all poor (Italian) individuals. Equally relevant, a neat expansion occurred in another traditionally neglected policy field, family policy, in particular through the introduction of the Single Universal Allowance. Further, with the launch of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the setting of essential levels of provisions, significant investments were made in social – and in particular childcare – services, which should allow reaching, in the medium term, a coverage rate closer to the European average. As expected, less incisive reforms were adopted in pensions and labour market fields. As to the latter, the Italian labour market is still heavily affected by low employment levels, stagnating wages, and the high incidence of atypical work. In the pension field, reinstated early exit options have been criticized by European institutions for being contrary to the efforts to modernize and slim down the Italian retirement system.

Overall, the analysis of welfare developments in the three major policy fields during the XVIII parliamentary term thus shows a rather mixed picture, where highly exceptional contextual conditions and political configurations made it possible to adopt reforms resting on heterogenous ideological and normative bases. Against such a backdrop, three main considerations can be made. First, after a decade mainly characterized

by retrenchment, during the latter legislature expansion occurred in all three social policy areas considered here. However, and second, in terms of distributive profiles and outcomes, the reforms had very different implications. If in the field of pensions, 'quota 100' strengthened the traditional approach to welfare, prioritizing pensions by means of well-established insider-biased policies, in the areas of family and anti-poverty policies, instead, the AUU and, most notably, the RdC, have a clearly redistributive impact in favour of disadvantaged groups, and strengthen the protection of social risks (related to the family situation, to poverty and social exclusion) that have been long neglected. This is despite the fact that the de facto exclusion of most poor migrants from the main anti-poverty policy creates a 'new' group institutionally excluded from the Italian social protection architecture. In this respect, it is interesting to note that RdC and 'quota 100' were the two flagship initiatives of the yellow-green coalition, targeting almost opposite electoral constituencies, being almost a perfect school case of logrolling. Third, and finally, as regards functional recalibration, looking at spending commitments, it is possible to point out how the investment in pensions, although targeting a restricted social clientele, could count on an overall allocation of over EUR 30 billion in the 2019-2022 period, comparable to the outlays estimated for RdC and the additional resources allocated to AUU. The net impact of the recalibration across welfare functions is therefore limited.

In sum, from a theoretical point of view, our historical-institutionalist conjectures are by and large vindicated. Path-departing reforms, largely conforming to Bonoli's (2012) affordable credit claiming, have been enacted in less costly and institutionalized policy fields, where there was the potential to expand social protection onto previously neglected (and politically weak or dispersed) constituencies (the poor, families, etc.). Yet, quite surprisingly, Italian governments pursued 'affordable credit claiming' strategies also in the retirement field, through the marginal (and catering to specific constituencies) expansion of pension rights. As expected, the potential to either further retrench or embark on a comprehensive reform path in the pension field was radically reduced, on the one hand, by deeply entrenched interests and constituencies and, on the other hand, due to budgetary and external political constraints.

One may argue that to the surprise of many, despite heterogeneous and unstable political configurations with assorted majorities and short-lived governments and lacking an overarching reform plan, welfare reforms during the XVIII parliamentary term broadly contributed to a recalibration of the Italian welfare state in both functional and distributive terms, thanks to the adoption of structural reforms in the anti-poverty field and in family policy, and the increase in expenditure in services (in childcare, active labour market policies, etc.). Yet, not all the reforms introduced in the last legislature went in the direction of making the Italian welfare state more sustainable and equitable, and the traditional distributive and functional distortions were not fully overcome. Moreover, it is debatable whether with this legislature Italy structurally embarked on a reform path leading to the recalibration of its welfare system. Rather, the reforms promised and included in the Budget Law for 2023 in the pension and in the anti-poverty fields, along with multiple problems in the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan at the local level, may signal a return to the traditional Italian welfare model.

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Administrative reform under mutating populism in office: insights from Italy (2018-2022)

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Abstract

This paper tracks the dynamics of administrative reform across two areas (civil service, simplification) in Italy, focusing on the XVIII parliamentary term, characterized by the presence of populist parties in three different coalition governments (Conte I, Conte II, Draghi). The alternation in power between different governments occurred in a context marked by the shift of the EU economic governance from a logic of conditionality to a logic of solidarity in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. After a decade of EU-led austerity, the shift of EU economic governance was expected to support and enable administrative reform at the national level. Our findings reveal that the structural lack of time induced the Draghi government to focus administrative reforms on a limited number of domains to produce quick and relevant results. This selective approach focusing on capacity building was an improvement in patterns of administrative reform if compared with what happened under the Conte I and II governments, which displayed a marked chasm between the level of talk and the level of action. This was due partly to populist parties not having pursued a distinctive agenda in matters of administrative reform despite their bold words, and partly to EU fiscal constraints.

1. Introduction

Uniquely in Europe, Italy witnessed five coalition governments dominated by populist parties in the period 2000–2021 (Berlusconi II, Berlusconi III, Berlusconi IV, Conte I, Conte II). The grand coalition government chaired by Mario Draghi (2021-2022), former President of the European Central Bank, also encompassed three populist parties in its parliamentary majority (Forza Italia, or 'Go Italy', FI; Lega Nord or 'Northern League', LN; the Movimento Cinque Stelle, 'Five Star Movement', FSM). The only party in opposition during the reign of Mario Draghi's government, the post-fascist populist party Fratelli d'Italia, or 'Brothers of Italy', FdI, followed the pattern typical of the Italian party system in which new populist actors react to the success of their fellow populist parties that enter coalition government (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016).

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Against this background, the XVIII parliamentary term (2018-2022) offers an extraordinary research window for scholars interested in the behaviour of populist parties when in government, and their impact on the making of administrative reforms. First, this parliamentary term was marked by considerable instability, with three successive government formations (Conte I, Conte II and Draghi governments) and three different ministers for public administration (Bongiorno, Dadone, Brunetta), who were the expression of three different populist parties (LN, FSM and FI, respectively). Second, in two out of the three governments (Conte II and Draghi), the presence of populists was balanced by the presence of mainstream parties (e.g. the Democratic Party, PD; +Europa; Liberi e Uguali, LEU, and other parliamentary groups created during the term) and technicians in key cabinet positions (in the case of the Draghi government, both the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Economy and Finance), with whom they had to come to terms. Finally, the context in which the XVIII parliamentary term unfolded was studded with extraordinary circumstances that were at once a challenge and an opportunity for the Italian PA (and for those in government, too). On the one hand, the management of the pandemic emergency due to the Sars-Cov2 virus (for which the Italian populist parties expressed diametrically opposed positions, cf. Russo and Valbruzzi 2022) and the consequent need to launch a credible recovery plan are particularly complex tasks for a country with reduced administrative capacity like Italy; on the other hand, the gradual shift at the European level from austerity to a solidarity-oriented approach paved the way for breaking with a long season of budget cuts, thereby opening a window for reforms that addressed some of the underlying problems of PA dysfunctions, such as staff shortages and the progressive ageing of civil servants (Ongaro, Di Mascio and Natalini 2022).

Based on these premises, in this article we aim to track the strategies for administrative reform pursued by the three consecutive governments during the XVIII parliamentary term in order to answer the following research questions:

> **RQ1.** During the XVIII parliamentary term, given the succession of governments and the changing contextual conditions, did the salience of administrative reforms change as part of the government agenda?
>
> **RQ2.** With representatives of different populist forces taking over the leadership of the Ministry for Public Administration in three cabinets that differed markedly with respect to their composition, did the impact of populist parties on administrative reforms change during the XVIII parliamentary term?

In order to answer these questions, an analytically grounded account for each of the cabinets during the 18th parliamentary term is provided. Actions taken by the PA ministers were traced by looking at three dimensions that are key to grasping the relationship between populist parties and public administration: a) the type of interventions proposed, b) the kind of rhetoric used and c) the attitude towards bureaucracy (see section 2). Empirically, the focus was on administrative simplification and civil service reform, two policy priorities that rank high on the agendas of the Italian populist parties (Di Mascio, Natalini and Ongaro 2021). Data were collected using source triangulation so as to ensure the validity of findings: the review of official documents (e.g., primary and secondary legislation) was coupled with the analysis of institutional monitoring reports and ministerial hearings recounted in the national press, as well as with a number of

interviews with key informants that brought to light issues that could not be deduced from the documentary analysis. More specifically, between December 2021 and May 2022, ten open interviews were carried out with ministerial advisors and senior civil servants of the Civil Service Department.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 offers a brief review of the literature on the relationship between populist parties and public administration, while section 3 illustrates the state of the art of administrative reforms in Italy. Section 4 presents the results of the empirical research, analysed for the three governments in office during the XVIII parliamentary term. Finally, section 5 discusses the findings in the light of the research questions outlined above and conjectures about future developments.

2. Literature review on populism and public administration

Over the past few decades, populist politicians have steadily increased their support, entering government in many democracies. Public administration reform projects inspired by the New Public Management paradigm that offered to measure performance objectively but failed to do so, that proposed to listen to the people but often did not, and that advocated policy driven by evidence but often failed to deliver, have fed cynicism about mainstream governing practices later exploited by populism (Stoker 2021). Populist politicians often joined the call for a 'Post-NPM' approach to the public service aimed at attenuating the negative consequences of New Public Management like increased fragmentation of governance or inadequate political control of civil servants (Reiter and Klenk 2019).

Given that policymaking relies to a great extent on bureaucracy, an emerging research agenda explores the implications of populism for governance (Rockman 2019; Bauer et al. 2021; Caiani and Graziano 2022). Theoretically, this stream of the literature revolves around two perspectives, exceptionalism and normality, that describe the effect of including populists in government (Askim, Karlsen and Kolltveit 2022). Many populist parties that enter government have a history of expressing dissatisfaction with civil servants, who are seen as part of the corrupt establishment. According to the exceptionalism perspective, there is a strong incentive to continue the opposition role while in government to reassure core voters that the party has not sold out to the establishment. This is expected to imply an increasing level of patronage, with populist politicians appointing as many loyalists as possible in government, complemented by centralization of decision-making and reduction of accountability.

Conversely, the normality perspective assumes that executive politicians from a populist party behave like those of any other party in government. First, populist parties vary in their outlook on public administration, and their views on the state are likely to differ, and upon entering government these differences will eventually come to the fore. Populist parties that call for more efficient governance, in particular those with a technocratic bent, need to ensure that experienced civil servants provide advice if they want to have any chance of implementing policies. Second, although at the heart of the populist rhetoric lies the idea that bureaucracy is part of the corrupt establishment, populists in government have often displayed a lack of interest in reforming bureaucracy, which is seen as a technical issue that their core voters do not perceive as salient (Peters and Pierre 2019). Third, most populist parties entering government have done so as

coalitions with mainstream parties. Tight interactions with mainstream coalition partners that are needed to search for compromise between different policy options may have sobering effects on populist parties in government. Finally, populist parties' room to manoeuver may be limited by a robust administrative order, which comes with legacies and path dependencies that constrain the administrative choices available. This may prevent populists in government from undertaking strategies like 'capturing' or 'dismantling' bureaucracies that go far beyond ordinary measures of enhancing political steering capacities (Bauer and Becker 2020).

As acknowledged above, when populists enter government this may not result in an overhaul of bureaucracy; it rather depends on their conduct in office. Politicians in general have three general choices after entering government: sidelining, empowering, or using bureaucracy (Peters and Pierre 2019). The first scenario is that of the marginalization of bureaucracy whose top officials are sidelined, leaving room for outsiders linked to populist parties to obtain positions in the nodal ganglions of the public sector. Upon being included for the first time in the executive government, populist parties can be incentivized to rely on the advice and the networks of institutional relations provided by senior civil servants. However, they often prefer instead to trace a clear dividing line with the old ruling class, of which the top administrative officials are an important part. This scenario can take place in several ways. First, sidelining can be more or less intrusive. Depending on the institutional context, the power of appointment may in fact be subject to rules, even constitutional ones, that safeguard merit or in any case make problematic the replacement of even a few top executives or entire ranks of public officials using trust-based criteria. Secondly, depending on the various types of populism, the style of appointments can be very different. In some cases, appointments may concern technically qualified individuals who, due to their skills, can take root in the ranks of civil service. In particular, this is the case where populist rhetoric focuses on the stereotype of lazy and incompetent bureaucrats that the new governing parties replace with skilled and virtuous individuals. In other cases, populists can even appoint poorly qualified people to the top echelons of administrations in order to be able to count on the personal and/or political loyalty of those who must lead the process of change within hostile offices where the power of the old ruling class is entrenched.

In the second scenario, the populist parties in government assign more powers to the bureaucracy. Once in office, populist parties may actually want to implement their policy priorities. In this scenario, it is important for populists in government to gain the consent of the bureaucracies within a tight schedule in order to be able to launch the new public policies expected by citizens as soon as possible. In this perspective, public managers, especially if they are inclined to maintain a neutral but supportive position with regard to the democratically invested political leadership, can be useful allies for populist parties. This can lead to a strengthening of the bureaucracy with the aim of enabling it to perform its task in the best possible way. One variant of the empowering scenario is that populist leaders coming into office will not be interested in governing or that they will focus only on a few policy domains such as immigration and leave much of the rest of government unattended to. The absence of effective leadership and direction from the top may enable some form of 'bureaucratic government' to appear, in direct contradiction to the rhetoric of populist parties that denigrates bureaucracy.

In the third scenario, the populist parties in government use the bureaucracy they inherited from their predecessors. This scenario can take place due to the cynicism or incapacity of the ruling populists. In the former case, the anti-statalism that characterizes populism is nothing more than a rhetorical device to stir up protests and gain the consent of dissatisfied citizens. Once in power, especially in countries with authoritarian tendencies, the logic of the past is reproduced (only with a different interpreter at the head of power). The same effect of leaving the role of bureaucracy unaltered can be brought about by the incapacity and inexperience of populist actors. In this case, populist leaders who neither have the necessary knowledge about administrative procedures nor know an adequate number of potential appointees who can help them design and implement new public policies end up using the people they find in public offices.

3. Mutating populism and public administration in Italy

Italy is a case of 'mutating populism' where diverse populist parties emerged as different incarnations of a consolidated anti-establishment ethos (Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove 2016). The success of populist parties is in part traceable to certain long-term determinants of political dissatisfaction characterizing modern Italy (Morlino and Tarchi 1996). The poor delivery of public services resulting from traits typical of Southern European bureaucracies— clientelistic patterns of personnel recruitment, formalism and legalism complemented by informal shadow governance structures, uneven distribution of resources, organizational fragment and insufficient mechanisms for policy coordination — is one of the key factors of chronic dissatisfaction with political parties and elites (Sotiropoulos 2004). A key feature of the Italian bureaucracy is the lack of an administrative elite: until the early 1990s the Italian administrative elite constituted an elderly 'ossified world' displaying extremely rare horizontal and vertical mobility, and was dominated by the legalistic outlook of personnel coming almost exclusively from the underdeveloped South. This low level of professionalism allowed the higher civil service to form a pact with politicians of reciprocal self-restraint: public managers renounced an autonomous proactive role in processes of policy making, while politicians refrained from interfering in the management of career advancements based on age and length of service (Cassese 1999).

The lack of integration between political and administrative elites made governments reluctant to 'use' the established bureaucracy. The general approach to the bureaucracy has been to 'sideline' it, meaning that governments filled ministerial cabinets with hundreds of loyal party officials, setting up a parallel advisory structure. Ministerial cabinets were a substitute for the ordinary bureaucracies and exercised executive tasks, thus also blurring the lines of accountability between politics and the administration. Given the legalism of the administrative system, professional corps (e.g., Council of State, Court of Accounts, State Attorney), whose staff are all trained in law, constituted the privileged recruitment pool, yielding heads of cabinets who provided ministers with advice about the legal aspects of the policy-making process (Di Mascio and Natalini 2016).

Since public sector organizations were often utilized by political parties to cultivate their clienteles, no government was able or willing to undertake administrative reforms until the early 1990s when the abrupt collapse of the Italian party system opened a

window of opportunity for administrative modernization. Policy entrepreneurs like the Ministers of Public Administration Cassese in 1993 and Bassanini in 1996-1998 exploited the political crisis to deliver long-awaited administrative reforms. The success of Italian policy entrepreneurs has depended heavily on their ability to repackage the internationally widespread New Public Management (NPM) doctrines as technical and bipartisan, drawing on their a priori expertise on the conditions and problems of public administration in Italy (Mele and Ongaro 2014). Policy entrepreneurs also exploited the intensification of the European integration process to strengthen their capacity to act in relation to a major problem of structural adjustment like the quality of public services, by weakening the position of opponents of administrative reforms (Natalini 2010).

Administrative reforms aimed to radically change the organization and functioning of all areas of public administration. The reform of the higher civil service was meant to be the point of departure for long-term administrative modernization, as reformers conceived it as the trigger for further reform in the other domains of civil service. The traditional subordination of senior civil servants to ministers was eliminated, meaning that managers were in charge of making decisions about the utilization of resources for achieving the objectives set by the political principals, and new specialized advisory bodies were introduced to appraise their results. However, a significant percentage of reform initiatives launched in the 1990s suffered from an 'implementation gap' (Ongaro and Valotti 2008), originating from the high level of political instability that determined a lack of political incentives to implement reforms. The new specialized bodies did not produce the directives, targets and indicators that should have oriented the performance evaluation of public managers, as politicians displayed a keen reluctance to cease meddling with administrative management. Since the confirmation of incumbent public managers did not become subject to thorough appraisal of results, the temporary nature of managerial positions was exploited by political elites to maintain control over administrative elites.

The implementation gap of administrative reforms contributed to the persistent deficit of economic competitiveness, which has kept budgetary pressures intense. As a consequence, a repertoire of across-the-board cuts has been progressively entrenched as it proved to be effective in containing government spending in the aftermath of the 1992 currency crisis that forced the Italian lira out of the European Monetary System. Across-the-board cuts were enacted as a response to the austerity imposed by the Eurozone governance on the Italian budget in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial meltdown (Di Mascio, Natalini and Stolfi 2013). The austerity imposed by the Eurozone governance on the Italian budget has been a major target of populist campaigning, which has fed into the perception of the Euro as a painful constraint afflicting the stagnating economy (Ongaro, Di Mascio and Natalini 2022).

While Eurosceptic rhetoric has been a unifying feature, populist parties differed on the emphasis that should be given to different areas of administrative reform. Centre-right populist parties shared the call for a deregulatory approach, which was complemented by different reform targets: FI prioritized civil service reform in an effort to increase productivity and reward merit by curbing the influence of trade unions over public employment regulation, the LN focused on the structure of government, with a view to devolving competences and resources to regional governments (in line with its

history as the regionalist party of the north). The FSM endorsed a more statist approach to public policy, alongside an emphasis on transparency and anticorruption as key topics of its broader approach to legality via the implementation of digital tools. The following empirical analysis highlights that, once in power, populist parties encountered turbulence within cabinets originating from the incoherence of policy positions.

4. Empirical section

4.1. Conte I government

The most noticeable element in the Conte I government was the abandonment of NPM recipes in favour of interventions perceived as simpler and more direct. Unlike previous administrative reform efforts, the new rules governing public sector employment did not represent the core of the measures in matters of personnel. Dissatisfaction with the complexity of NPM, in doctrine and practices, was epitomized by the emphasis on 'concrete' actions for raising the productivity of public employment displayed by the Minister for Public Administration Giulia Bongiorno, a prominent criminal lawyer who was elected senator among the ranks of the LN. In particular, a 'Unit for Concreteness' was introduced at the Ministry for Public Administration, which was supposed to ensure the implementation of the measures envisaged in a three-year Plan of 'Concrete Actions'. This Plan, to be adopted by ministerial decree, was supposed to verify the correct application of the provisions on the organization and functioning of the administrations as well as to ensure the improvement of their efficiency, with an indication of the timeframe for the implementation of corrective actions. To do this, the Unit for Concreteness, with 53 staff members, was supposed to carry out inspections and visits in order to monitor the state of implementation of the provisions by the administrations, identifying the methods of organization and management of human resources according to criteria of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Non-compliance with the corrective measures indicated by the Nucleus following its inspection should have been a source of managerial or disciplinary responsibility and should have led to the inclusion of the non-compliant administration in a list published on the website of the Department of Public Administration.

These provisions were never implemented, also due to the short duration of the Conte I government. However, even if these measures had actually been introduced, they could at best have allowed the incumbent government to show itself as a champion of public virtue and efficiency with respect to individual cases that ended up in the media spotlight. The small size of the structure and the manifest inadequacy of the powers conferred on this Nucleus would in fact have made it impracticable to monitor an even minimally significant percentage of the thousands of units that compose the fragmented Italian administrative system.

In keeping with the fight against absenteeism that marked previous governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, the Conte I government also introduced biometric detection tools and cameras to monitor access of public employees to the workplace (Law No. 56/2019). This measure provoked harsh reactions from trade unions in the public sector and in particular in the school sector as it was claimed that the measure violated

employee privacy and was an unjustified form of criminalization of bureaucracy. In fact, this measure was also never implemented.

As regards simplification policies, on 26 February 2019, Minister Bongiorno called a meeting to define the 'Simplification Pact for the three-year period 2019-21'. The meeting was attended by around one hundred representatives of public administrations and with the plan to also involve business associations, citizens and professional categories. The final approval of the Pact came on 25 July 2019 in the Unified Conference. In line with the Simplification Agendas pioneered by previous governments, the Pact for Simplification contained a programme of new simplification measures, with the identification of timeframes, targets and responsibilities. This programme identified four priority areas of intervention: the electronic business dossier, the business information portal, the simplification of controls, and the standardisation of forms.

In the field of public infrastructure construction, the traditional instrument of simplification has been the introduction of extraordinary commissioners to whom the specific regulations have assigned more or less broad powers to accelerate the implementation of procedures, or to derogate from the regulations in force, including environmental and landscape issues. The commissioner, however, has often lacked the skills and resources to solve the problems of planning works. In fact, the frequent recourse to this remedy (which by its very nature should have been extraordinary) contributed to the lack of concentration of effort on increasing the efficiency of ordinary administration, for example by increasing their powers. In an attempt to accelerate procurement procedures for the realization of public works, Decree Law No. 32/2019 (Sblocca Cantieri) curbed the regulatory powers of the Italian anticorruption authority (ANAC). This provision was pushed by the LN with the declared objective of deregulating and boosting growth, even though the higher corruption risks resulting from this change, highlighted by the President of the ANAC Raffaele Cantone before his resignation in the summer of 2019, were in stark contrast with the FSM's call for further delegation of powers to the ANAC. The FSM had also campaigned for a significant reduction of senior civil servants' salaries, but this issue was removed from its agenda when it entered government.

4.2. Conte II government

The new Minister for Public Administration, Fabiana Dadone, a lawyer elected to the Chamber of Deputies among the ranks of the FSM, shared with her predecessor the reluctance to launch ambitious reforms that aimed to radically change the organization and the functioning of the public sector. Unlike her predecessor, however, the new Minister downplayed the fight against absenteeism in favour of interventions aimed at boosting the digital transformation of the public sector. In particular, the new Minister put emphasis on the diffusion of 'agile working' — a species of remote working that had been introduced by law n. 81/2017 - across Italian public administrations for the purpose of facilitating work and family balance, on the one hand, and enhancing environmental sustainability, on the other.

Agile working is primarily characterized by the absence of place and time constraints and also by an organization by phases, cycles and objectives agreed between the worker and employer with a view to increase productivity. It differs from 'telework',

which is defined as working remotely from a fixed work station with equipment provided by the employer and involving the same working hours and conditions as in the office. After the introduction of law n. 81/2017, public administrations were expected to identify the activities that can be carried out through agile working and establish annual implementation objectives on a voluntary basis. However, the limited number of public administrations that had trialled agile working before the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic limited themselves to compliance with the law, without any review of the organizational models or revision of the performance evaluation system that was needed to measure results rather than hours worked.

The COVID-19 crisis and the consequent policies implemented by the Conte II government to allow remote work as a substitute means of carrying out public services caused an explosion in 'agile working'. However, the latter was implemented as an emergency measure without the features required by the legislation like individual agreements between workers and administrations and the adoption of an internal organizational plan. In an attempt to transform agile working from provisional measure to being commonplace for public administrations, the Conte II government introduced in 2021 the three-year 'Organizational plan for agile work' (POLA) as a section of the Performance Plan that requires public administrations to identify objectives, targets and indicators for the progressive application of agile working. The introduction of the plans was meant to supersede the emergency regulation which allowed the public sector to use agile working without collective and individual agreement and with simplified regulation. From 30 April 2021, the new regime was expected to overcome the provision of agile working as a common working pattern for the public sector and the minimum mandatory share of 50% of employed staff in favour of greater discretion in the use of agile working on the basis of the specific needs of each public administration. However, despite the Minister's rhetoric about the radical transformation of public administration unleashed by the diffusion of agile working, the voluntary nature of the Plans and the absence of enforcement limited the effective spread of this form of remote working across public bodies.

As regards administrative simplification, the presence of a Minister elected to the ranks of the FSM marked some change in the rhetoric behind reform measures. On the one hand, administrative simplification, besides being a tool to relaunch the country's economy, was framed as an opportunity to 'build a new relationship of trust between administration and citizens'[1] primarily through completing the path towards full digital transition. Several online consultations of citizens and stakeholders were launched by the Department of Civil Service (DFP) between the end of 2019 and mid-2020 to map critical issues and priorities for action, albeit with little success in terms of participation (only 103 respondents including citizens and companies) (DFP 2020). On the other hand, in line with FSM's manifesto, simplification cannot coincide with unbridled deregulation that would undermine transparency.[2] In this regard, an ad hoc Commission was set up, composed of 17 experts tasked with proposing solutions for simplification that were compatible with rules on the prevention of corruption. However, proposals from this Commission did not turn into any legislative initiative.

[1] Hearing of Minister Dadone by the Parliamentary Simplification Commission, 13 January 2021.
[2] *Ibid.*

When tested against the facts, however, the actions taken by the Conte II government show less discontinuity than declared: the demands for procedural simplification from the various administrations (local ones in particular) during the pandemic, and the need to get public works back on track to relaunch the economy after the emergency, led to a renewed focus on temporary deregulation, which was not too dissimilar to the 'Sblocca Cantieri' Decree.[3] Indeed, besides introducing some measures to facilitate citizens' access to all PA digital services, in July 2020 the so-called Simplification Decree (DL 76/2020, later converted into Law 120/2020) introduced again some relaxations on public contracts and constructions, with an extension of the use of direct entrusting and simplified procedures without a call for tenders. With regard to long-term actions, the same Decree provided for the launch of the 2020-2023 Simplification Agenda, a blueprint document that was to define a road map with clear objectives and timeframes. In continuity with the past, the Agenda (approved by the Unified Conference on 23 November 2020) resulted from a concerted process led by the Technical Table for Simplification already set up in 2015, made up of representatives of the DFP, the Conference of the Regions, Anci and UPI. Some targeted actions were envisaged such as the simplification and re-engineering of procedures, the standardization of digital forms, the elimination of unnecessary burdens, the measurement of the actual length of administrative proceedings, as well as the implementation of the 'once only' principle, whereby the administration does not ask citizens and enterprises for the information and data it already has. The anticipated demise of the Conte II government on 13 February 2021 blocked the Agenda roadmap, which was later taken over — albeit with some modifications — by the Draghi government. However, the concrete feasibility of the proposed interventions within the cabinet's lifespan was questionable in any case, given the persisting separation between the fields of administrative modernization and digital innovation (both in terms of planning and implementation responsibilities) and the lack of digital skills across the public sector, both typical traits of the Italian case (Natalini 2022).

4.3. Draghi government

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRPP) elaborated by the Draghi government differed substantially from the draft that had been elaborated by the Conte II government in the emphasis placed on administrative reforms. Administrative modernization was identified by the Draghi government as a key area for structural reform, affecting horizontally all missions in the NRPP funded by the EU to sustain economic recovery. However, concern for the quick implementation of measures in the early stage of NRPP implementation led the Draghi government to downplay post-pandemic recovery as an opportunity for sweeping change. In keeping with the previous cabinets, the Draghi government pursued incremental targeted measures primarily aimed at (re)building the capacity of the PA after austerity cutbacks. Indeed, the strategy of breaking away from the all-embracing (and for that reason non-implementable) administrative reforms of the 1990s was explicitly asserted by the new Minister for

[3] 'I lavori pubblici tra Covid e decreto semplificazione', *lavoce.info*, 3 August 2020.

Public Administration,[4] Renato Brunetta, elected within the ranks of FI having previously served in the same role under the Berlusconi IV government (2008-2011).

During his former mandate, Brunetta had distinguished himself by a very adversarial approach to trade unions, launching a package of managerial-inspired reforms focused on increasing the individual productivity of civil servants (epitomised as 'slackers') and severely reducing the scope of collective bargaining (Di Mascio, Natalini and Ongaro 2021). Instead, under the Draghi government, with a broader and more composite majority and in view of the conspicuous resources made available by the NRRP, his approach somewhat followed in continuity with the two previous cabinets, moving away from the NPM's tenets and shifting the spotlight from individual performance to the capability of structures and to human capital. This trend was particularly noticeable in recruitment: on the one hand, the first steps of the new government in the field focused on fast-track (let's say emergency) measures such as the unblocking of recruitment and the hiring of temporary staff, at once necessary for the implementation of the NRRP and easier to realise as they were welcomed by all stakeholders (Di Mascio, Natalini and Profeti 2022); on the other hand, the Draghi government marked a return to concertation with the public-sector trade unions: negotiations for renewal of contracts for 2019-2021 began with the 'Pact for Innovation in the Civil Service and for Social Cohesion' signed at Palazzo Chigi on 10 March 2021 by the government and the main trade union confederations, the final agreement being reached between ARAN and trade unions on 9 May 2022. In addition to providing for salary increases and the acknowledgement of retrospective pay, the agreement incorporated some regulatory innovations introduced as part of the Mission of 'Digitalization, Innovation and Security in the P.A.' of the NRRP, such as a new four-area personnel classification system, the strengthening and reorganization of the training system, an extended protection for vulnerable workers and, last but not least, the regulation of agile working after the pandemic emergency.

It was precisely agile working (or, more generally, remote working) which was the thorniest issue in the relations between Minister Brunetta, who — unlike his predecessor — showed himself to be inwardly hostile to generalized remote work, and the trade unions, who instead continued to call for greater recourse to agile working given the flare-up of infections. The very harsh media clash, in which the Minister dusted off the old rhetoric on slackers depicting workers 'locked up at home, with their smartphones on their milk bottles, pretending to do remote work',[5] and called for a return to 100 per cent presence from 15 October 2021, does not, however, fully match the facts. Indeed, in the same time span (late 2021-early 2022) the government agreed with unions on some guidelines for the ordinary use of agile work in the PA that provided for its activation on an individual and voluntary basis, with staff rotation and to the maximum extent of 49%, just as ARAN signed an agreement, again with the unions, for agile work in the collective agreement for the civil service sector. Very little or anything, though, has yet been done to enable conditions to make agile working more productive, be they technological, organizational or training-related: the implementing regulation of the PIAO (integrated activity and organization plan), i.e. the document that according to Decree Law 80/2021 would incorporate and replace a whole series of compulsory acts for public

[4] 'PA, Brunetta: no grandi riforme ma strappi innovativi', *La Stampa*, 7 March 2022.

[5] 'Smart working, Brunetta: 'Basta far finta di lavorare'. Ira sindacati', *Adnkronos*, 4 February 2022.

administrations including POLAs, was only approved at the end of June 2022 (less than a month before Draghi's resignation), and single administrations are still moving ahead in short order.

As regards administrative simplification, instead, the measures proposed by Brunetta were in full continuity with the Simplification Agenda 2020-23, envisaging the completion of a national catalogue of 600 simplified and standardized procedures by mid-2026, and the achievement of the full interoperability of desks and platforms so as to ensure compliance with the once-only principle. The only relevant change is that, thanks to the financial resources made available by the NRRP, streamlining initiatives were now complemented by ad hoc technical assistance to the public administrations involved in the implementation of the NRRP, in particular the local ones. Strong continuity with past government is also recorded on the governance side: the creation of an ad hoc Unit for the Rationalization and Improvement of Regulation at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers to serve the purposes of the NRRP did not challenge the DFP's guidance in the simplification domain, and the pivotal role of the Technical Table as a venue for concertation with local governments and stakeholders (Di Mascio, Natalini and Profeti 2022).

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has investigated the impact of populist actors in government on the Italian public service during the XVIII parliamentary term and has highlighted some traits marking their influence over administrative reforms as well as some features of Italian populist parties. First, the salience of administrative reforms as part of the government agenda has steadily increased after the formation of the Draghi cabinet within the frame of the new EU governance for post-pandemic recovery. However, the emphasis on the success of administrative reforms as an enabling factor for the implementation of the NRPP has implied only an incremental restructuring of policy-making patterns during the XVIII parliamentary term. Administrative reforms undertaken by the Draghi government can be qualified as loosely interconnected and piecemeal rather than as a set of interventions coalescing around NPM doctrines, and this marks a departure from the course of action pursued by the governments in office in the 1990s.

The shift from a pattern of comprehensive administrative reforms targeting every area of the public sector to a pattern of selective administrative reforms targeting only specific areas was already underway in Italy where populist parties in government shared a lack of concern for long-term administrative modernization. Whereas the emphasis of concrete actions by populist actors was due to their broader lack of expertise and their reluctance to apply complex theories like the NPM, the course of action pursued by the Draghi government seemed to reflect and incorporate some stock-tacking from previous reform exercises whose implementation gap had brought discredit to the prospect of long-term administrative modernization.

Second, the succession of three governments in the same parliamentary term has further enhanced the reactive nature of reform sequencing in Italy, meaning that the administrative reform trajectory is marked by reversals that make reform issues more or less salient. Given the different reform priorities endorsed by populist parties with regard to the reform of public employment, this area has been marked by intense reactive

sequencing as highlighted by the reversals that marked the trajectory of policies aimed at curbing absenteeism (from the Conte I to the Conte II government) and promoting the shift to agile working (from the Conte II to the Draghi government). Conversely, populist parties shared a focus on a deregulatory approach and this has made the area of administrative simplification less exposed to reform reversals. In light of the enduring demand for populism in the Italian electoral market, it is likely that reactive sequencing will persist after the XVIII legislature, thus decreasing the chance that the incremental interventions launched by the Draghi government will eventually embed in a coherent cumulative reform trajectory.

Third, our analysis highlighted that populists in government talked more than they acted, a finding much in line with what happens in other countries where the rhetoric about administrative modernization has not been matched with consistent action (Peters and Pierre 2019). The decoupling of talk and action on the issue of administrative reform has been greatly enhanced by the mutating character of Italian populism, in a context marked by the fragmentation of the party system. As highlighted by the inconsistency exhibited by Brunetta in his relationships with the trade unions, populist actors are extremely fluid on the recipes to be proposed for the modernization of the Italian public administration, supporting tactical conveniences of the specific political phase.

Fourth, the Italian bureaucracy has not been radically reshaped by populist parties in government and this finding resonates with the normality perspective reviewed in section two. The XVIII parliamentary term was marked by a lack of any significant reform effort in two key areas that are typically targeted by populist parties in government that aim to 'dismantle' or 'capture' the state, namely the appointment of senior civil servants and the reorganization of the state apparatus (Bauer and Becker 2020). In particular, our empirical analysis has found no trace of reform in the area of the senior civil service. This has implied that populist parties in government recruited top officials for ministerial cabinets from the professional corps at the core of the Italian state, in continuity with practices that date back decades. The established pattern of a bargain between political power and job security has also been reproduced: higher civil servants have been 'sidelined', meaning that they have been deprived of an autonomous role in policymaking, while politicians have refrained from practising a major turnover in top posts. On the one hand, the reproduction of this bargain was due to the inability of populist parties in government to recruit technically qualified outsiders. On the other hand, seemingly of equal importance was the lack of any overt reaction of top Italian civil servants in a country like Italy where public managers are used to serve different political masters in the context of well-entrenched distrustful politico-administrative relationships.

Finally, our empirical analysis highlighted that the shift in EU governance had significant consequences for the dynamics of administrative reforms in Italy. It may be conjectured that administrative reforms after the XVIII parliamentary term will be shaped by the dynamics of the two-level game at the EU Member States interface. This means that the EU will have to find the right balance between sticking to the original timetable for the implementation of agreed-upon investments and reforms, on the one hand, and being flexible towards the latest developments, including the formation of a new government in Italy. It also implies that administrative reforms will be shaped by the reaction of populist parties in government to the strategies pursued by EU-level policymakers.

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Economic reform strategies and recovery policies in Italy from Conte to Draghi

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Abstract

Two main aims characterized the 2018-2022 Italian economic policy. The first was reforming the whole economic system to stop the so-called 'Italian decline' that eroded the competitiveness and growth of the Italian economy for decades. The second was recovering from an impressive sequence of crises (the Eurozone crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and later the consequences of war in Ukraine) that endangered the Italian economic system and the sustainability of the Italian public debt. This paper analyses the crucial steps in the reform strategies and recovery policies carried out by the three governments that led Italy from 2018 to 2022, particularly emphasizing the oscillating relationship between the three Italian governments and the European Union. To this end, particular attention will be devoted to the Conte governments' economic reform proposals and the subsequent recovery strategies. These proposals will be drawn from some crucial documents: the Government contract for the first Conte government, the Colao plan, and the first draft of the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) prepared during the last days of the second Conte government. These documents will be compared with the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza approved under the Draghi government. The paper will also discuss the role of the EU in addressing Italian economic and recovery policies.

1. Introduction

During the Italian XVIII Legislature, three different governments were in charge. Each of these governments had to face a dramatic challenge coming from outside the Italian system. The first Conte government (Conte I), created by the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and the Lega, governed Italy from June 2018 to September 2019 and faced the consequences of the early 2010s Eurozone crisis and the never-solved problems caused to the Italian economy and society by the so-called Italian decline.[1] The second Conte government (Conte II), now based on the partnership of the M5S with the Partito Democratico (PD) and some minor parties, desperately fought against the Covid-19 pandemic that hit in Italy in early 2020. When the Conte II government collapsed in January 2021, a new government was formed under the leadership of the former Governor of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. It included all the parties in the Italian Parliament, except for Fratelli d'Italia and Comunisti Italiani. The Draghi government continued to face the impact of the pandemic until the war in Ukraine challenged the international political and economic order, imposing on it new policies and economic strategies.

[1] On the Italian decline issue and its explanation, see Simoni (2020).

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All three governments planned and tried to implement economic recovery policies. However, there were two kinds of recovery policies on their agenda inspired by two different recovery strategies. The first was a long-term recovery policy that aimed to address the Italian economy's structural problems by redefining the nature of Italian involvement in the Economic and Monetary Union. The second was a short-term recovery policy devoted to restarting the Italian economy after the pandemic. While the Conte I government mainly aimed to address the problem of the Italian decline and the impact of the 2010s crisis with a long-term recovery policy, the Conte II government mainly worked on recovery from the damages of the pandemic. The Draghi government had to adapt the two kinds of recovery policies to a new and confusing international context, while facing the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and using the opportunities offered by EU financial support.

The relationship between the Italian government and the EU changed from 2018 to 2022 according to the attitude and objectives of the government in charge and its economic and recovery policies. During the Conte I government, particularly in its first months in power, the EU was the primary target of criticism, as it was presented as an obstacle to the implementation of the populist economic programme of the government. After the start of the pandemic crisis, however, the European Union became a reference for defining a recovery strategy and inspiring economic reforms. The EU mobilized considerable economic resources, and ambitious plans for economic recovery were launched. Thus, the interaction of domestic and European activities and multilevel cooperation became crucial for Italian recovery, notwithstanding the controversial attitude of some of the main parties in power towards European integration and EU economic governance.

This article analyses the crucial steps in the economic recovery policies carried out by the three governments that led Italy from 2018 to 2022, particularly emphasizing the oscillating relationship between the governments and the European Union. To this end, particular attention will be devoted to the Conte governments' economic proposals and the subsequent recovery strategies. They were described in three crucial documents: the Contratto di Governo, the Colao plan, and the first draft of the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) prepared during the last days of the second Conte government. These documents will be compared with the PNRR approved under the Draghi government, also considering the new needs that emerged due to the war in Ukraine and the downsizing of economic transactions with Russia. Of course, these documents do not include all the aims nor do they disclose all the three governments' ambitions. Other objectives had been proposed in crucial documents and electoral programmes.[2] However, the stringent needs imposed by the pandemic and the urgency in preparing, submitting and implementing the PNRR defined the priorities. Also, the sequence of the documents illustrates clearly the evolution of the recovery policies carried out by the three governments in charge during the legislature, which meant moving from long-term and very ambitious plans for long-term recovery to a more focussed and less

[2] An example comes from Draghi's declaration to Parliament on 17 February 2021, in which many long-term objectives and reforms are mentioned. However, among these issues, only those included in the PNRR were carried out during the short period of Draghi's stay in power. See Senato della Repubblica (2021).

ambitious short- and mid-term objectives of the PNRR. This move is the core of the process-tracing exercise proposed in this article.

2. Challenging the EU. The first Conte government and the failure of the populist economic policy

The roots of the early proposal of economic reforms of the first Conte government are to be found in the debate that started in the 1990s about the reasons for the so-called Italian economic decline. After 2008 and particularly in the early 2010s, this debate became more confrontational due to the dramatic impact of the Eurozone crisis and the austerity policies implemented to prevent the dissolution of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Also, the debate moved from academic and political milieus to the level of ordinary citizens and dramatically impacted electoral results, favouring the rise of populist parties in Italy, which proposed economic recovery strategies based on radical economic ideas and a fierce anti-EU attitude.[3] The two main Italian populist parties – the M5S and the Lega – won the 2018 elections and created the Conte I government. When in power, they tried to implement their economic ideas and policy proposals, but soon clashed with a much more complex reality than they had expected.

Explaining the reasons for the Italian decline or analysing the impact of the Eurozone crisis on the Italian economy is not among the aims of this essay. The explanations floated at the time profoundly influenced the 'populist economic theory', which inspired the economic recovery policy of the first Conte government and some economic policy choices during the Conte II government. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the genesis of particular policy choices and political behaviours that influenced the attitudes of parties in power towards recovery strategies.

Populists drew from the debate on the Italian decline some elements that addressed their political programmes toward anti-Europeanism and the rejection of monetary integration and the euro.[4] Inspired by the theories of a few thinkers and the re-elaboration of scientific literature, a kind of 'populist economic theory' emerged, explaining Italian decline and the persisting crisis as a consequence of European integration and the boundaries of the EMU and its rules (Di Quirico 2021a). Thus, the economic policy proposals advanced by the populists challenged the views adopted by the EU and suggested the dismantling of many constraints, primarily the euro. Consequently, the rejection of the EMU implied the rejection of austerity policies derived from the EMU governance framework and the limits to public debt.[5] In other words, the 'populist economic theory' suggested a return to the 'golden age of the 1980s' and the economic model of that time.[6]

[3] Among these ideas there are marginal and contested monetary and economic theories such as chartism, economic sovereignism, and misleading interpretations of Italian economic history.

[4] The term 'Anti-European/anti-Europeanism' is preferred to the traditional term 'Euroscepticism' because the latter is a definition adopted in the past to define actors and concepts that opposed further integration. Today this term is inadequate to define parties, actors and concepts that reject the EU and integration as a whole and propose its dissolution.

[5] One of the main targets of populists and anti-euro activists was the debt-break rule (principio del pareggio di bilancio) inserted in the Italian constitution during the Eurozone crisis (Constitutional Law n. 1/2012). The rule limits the government's power to deviate from the budget balance to specific cases such as deep economic depression, financial crisis, and natural disasters. See Sottilotta, (2020).

[6] Populists insisted on the crucial role of State intervention in the economy, salary indexing, and deficit spending budget policies such as those adopted in Italy during the late 1970s and 1980. See Bagnai (2012).

The M5S and the Lega elaborated these proposals differently in their political programmes. The M5S emphasized the anti-austerity proposals and paid attention to social issues such as poverty and unemployment. At the same time, the Lega recovered anti-Europeanism and the rejection of the euro from its 1990s programmes, proposing Italexit as the primary solution for the economic crisis (Di Quirico 2021b; Ivaldi, Lanzone Woods, 2017; Garcia Lupato and Tronconi 2016; Franzosi, Marone and Salvati 2015; Huysseune 2010). This partial convergence in economic proposals then facilitated the two parties' alliance after the elections. Meanwhile, the main obstacle to implementing their economic recovery programme came from the dramatic divergence of their economic policy proposals from the EU norms and the unavoidable clash that consequentially followed between the Italian government and the EU institutions.

Initially, negotiations between the M5S and the Lega were complicated by the two parties' different political backgrounds and policy aims. They finally created a government and introduced a new instrument for defining a joint political programme. The *Contratto per il governo del cambiamento* (Contract for the government of change) was an agreement which described the aims and the rationale of the activities to be realized by their coalition when in government. It included some specific innovations such as the *Reddito di cittadinanza*, *Quota 100*, and the Flat tax that became the flagship measures of the Conte I government.[7] There were other specific reform proposals, such as the introduction of a Ministry for Tourism, an increase in police officers, and some administrative reforms to accelerate and simplify investments, tax collection, and infrastructure building.

The Contract was a mix of the most important policy proposals by the parties now allied in the government. Among the three flagship measures, the *Reddito di cittadinanza* was the core of the M5S's social policy proposals,[8] while the Flat tax was the core of the Lega fiscal policy. *Quota 100* was coherent with both the M5S and the Lega criticism of the Fornero pension system reform,[9] which delayed the retirement of many workers. However, the mixed nature of the document is strident in the field of economic policy, where the ecologist approach of the M5S and the anti-European approach of the Lega merged.[10] The Contract sections regarding the economic issues and, in particular, the recovery strategies to be implemented, adopted the logic of the EU Green Deal,[11] and made the circular economy, decarbonization and renewable energy sources the core of

[7] The 'reddito di cittadinanza' (citizens' income) is a subsidy to working-age citizens with a low income. Instead, the 'pensione di cittadinanza' (citizens' pension) aims to support the elderly and poor. Both subsidies increase the total incomes of the beneficiaries to €780 per month. The 'Quota 100' regards the pension system and aims to allow workers retirement if the sum of their age and the years of paid contributions reach 100 (e.g. 62 year-old workers who paid social security contributions for 38 years). Finally, the Flat Tax is a fiscal regime based on two fixed tax rates (15% and 20%). See Giugliano (2019), Monaco (2022, 10 and 12-13).

[8] In the Contract (p. 29), there is a reference to the 'salario minimo' (minimum salary) to establish a minimum threshold for workers' wages. This became an important issue for social policy in the Conte II and Draghi governments.

[9] The Fornero pension reform (Riforma Fornero) was introduced in December 2011 by the Minister Elsa Fornero as part of the law 214/ 2011 (the so-called Decreto salva Italia) adopted by the Monti government.

[10] The M5S was born as an ecologist movement which focused on 5 main policy issues (one for each of the five stars in its name). These issues were public water, environment, sustainable mobility, growth, and connectivity.

[11] On the EU Green Deal, see https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/ .

the transformation projects for the Italian economy and industrial growth (pp. 10-11). Meanwhile, contestation of the EU rules and proposals for a drastic change in multilevel governance and the distribution of powers between the member states and the EU were meant to gain the fiscal and operative latitude the government needed to support the recovery of traditional Italian economic sectors such as agriculture and export-oriented industries.

Fiscal and budgetary policies were the core matters in the Contract. Implementing the green transition to make the Italian economy more competitive, reducing raw material and energy imports, and innovating productions in new and technologically advanced sectors, which are other expensive aims of the Contract, needed money and state support. Lowering taxes and supporting infrastructure building also needed to be financed. Thus, the crucial problem of the Conte I economic and recovery plans was the impossibility of reconciling the long-term recovery policy with a necessarily constrained fiscal policy, particularly the fiscal policy required by the EMU governance and the Stability and Growth Pact. This contrast is particularly strident in the field of public debt reduction. With regard to this issue, the Contract (p. 17) explicitly rejected austerity measures and stated that debt reduction had to come from GDP growth. In practice, the Contract implied expansive economic and fiscal policies based on subsidies (*Reddito di cittadinanza*), fiscal incentives for the energetic requalification of public and private buildings and the support of firms involved in the circular economy, tax cuts (Flat tax and 'friendly' collection of fiscal credits), compensations for savers and shareholders damaged by the crisis and bankruptcy of some Italian banks, and public investments in infrastructures to be financed mainly with new public debt.[12] These policies were unfortunately irreconcilable with EMU rules. The only possibility to change this situation depicted in the Contract would have entailed 'further discussion of the EU treaties and the European-level rules' (p. 17). In the meantime, pressures have to be exerted to induce the European Commission to exclude the expenditure on public investments from the deficit calculation.

So, in the Contract, anti-Europeanism and de-integration were the fundamental strategies to gain operative space to finance long-term recovery. This also emerged in sector-specific strategies. In the agriculture and fishery section, the Contract proposed revising EU policies and empowering member states and parliaments to approve external trade agreements (p. 9). Besides, the Contract proposed the further discussion of EU rules for the fishery sector and the Basel rules on micro-enterprise rating to access banks' credit (p. 15). Finally, the influence exercised by the EU on Italian fiscal and budgetary policy and its constraints would have to be diminished by abolishing the EU safeguard clauses which impose raising the VAT rates and other taxes in the event of non-fulfilment of deficit flexibility rules negotiated by the previous Italian governments.[13]

[12] The Contract identifies some specific sources for funding the programme. Among them, there are savings obtained from waste costs reduction, an ambiguous and poorly defined 'management of the debt', and 'a limited recourse to the deficit' (p. 17). Savings and resources from the first two sources are not quantified and probably largely inadequate to the programme's financial need.

[13] The safeguard clauses (regole di salvaguardia) were introduced during the last Berlusconi government in 2011 (law decree 98/2011) to obtain EU approval of the Italian budget. These clauses had been applied

The anti-EU nature of the Contract and the Conte I recovery strategy also emerge in the section dedicated specifically to the EU (pp. 53-55). The key aims here are reforming the EU economic governance framework and disempowering those supranational decision-makers with no democratic legitimization in favour of empowering the European Parliament. A critical attitude also emerges about some EU economic governance elements, such as the Fiscal Compact and the constitutionalization of the debt brake, the Stability and Growth Pact and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM)[14]. However, to understand the fundamental attitudes of the Conte I government toward the EU, it is helpful to consider the section about the EU in a previous draft of the Contract dated May 14 (Huffington Post 2018). In this draft, there is an explicit reference to reforming the EU treaties and introducing procedures to permit member states to exit or permanently opt out of the EMU (p. 35). The same document considers the possibility of freezing or writing off part of the Italian debt in bonds in the ECB's hands (p. 38). The Contract's final version then reformulated these statements toward less ambitious and disruptive proposals. However, the extreme anti-EU and anti-euro attitude of at least part of the government coalition and the influence of 'populist economic theory' survived inside the Conte I government. They sometimes re-emerged in the Conte II government, influencing its economic and European policy choices.

When the Conte I government initiated its work, the contradictions of its recovery and budgetary policies emerged as well as the contradictory attitudes of the government towards the EU. The problem was financing the expensive reforms programme while converging toward an economic model promoted by the EU. The solution adopted by Conte I was an 'outflanking and blackmailing' strategy based on the possibility of Italexit, which could damage and destabilize the whole EU economy.[15] The aim was to obtain at least broad flexibility regarding deficit and public debt reduction. A 'budget war' between the Italian government and the EU resulted in the abandonment of the anti-euro strategy and acceptance by the Conte government of the EU rules.[16] Consequently, the lack of funds and the budget constraints made the Contract plans for economic recovery unattainable, jeopardizing some flagship policies. This situation and the subsequent competition on the distribution of funds between the flagship measures undermined the government alliance well before Salvini's attempt to change the balance of power in the coalition drove the alliance to a stalemate and caused the government to fall.

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under the Monti government (law decree 201/2011) and renewed in various forms by subsequent Italian governments. The clauses were abrogated in 2020 (law decree 34/2020).

[14] The European Stability Mechanism (ESM) is a financial institution created in 2012 by the Eurozone member states. Its main function is mobilizing financial resources to support EMU member states in financial distress. Those states that ask for ESM aid are subject to stringent conditionality on their budget and fiscal policies. See Gocaj and Meunier (2013); Howarth and Spendzharova (2019).

[15] The opposition of President Mattarella to the appointment of the Italexit strategist Savona as Minister of Economic Affairs did not completely curb the possibility of Italy leaving the EMU. Other episodes such as the mini-bot issue, suggest that members of the government coalition continued to support Italexit plans. Also, the possibility of an Italian default because of a sovereign bonds crisis remained an option and could have caused Italy's abandonment of the EMU. See Di Quirico (2021b).

[16] About these events and the dismissing of the Italexit strategy, see Fabbrini and Zgaga (2019), Marzinotto (2020), Di Quirico (2021b), and Monaco (2022).

3. Begging the EU. The second Conte government and the pandemic crisis

Prime minister Conte resigned on August 20, 2019, due to the withdrawal of the Lega from the alliance. The risk of a landslide electoral victory for the Lega induced the M5S and some parties from the centre-left to agree on a new government pact. The Conte II cabinet entered office on September 5, 2019. A few months later, the Covid-19 pandemic overwhelmed Italy and caused a dramatic economic downfall. Recovering from the pandemic's economic impact added to the previous need for recovery from the Eurozone crisis and decades of economic decline, changing the nature of the Italian recovery policy. This situation required a new and ambitious policy and a solution to the budget and financial constraints that had made the Conte I recovery policy unachievable.

The pandemic emergency generated a U-turn in Italy's EU policy. The EU became the only institution capable of supporting the Italian economy in resisting the impact of the pandemic and lockdown, and this required a change in attitude on the part of the government. However, such a drastic turnaournd of mind was unacceptable for parties and supporters who had spent years criticizing the invasiveness of EU economic governance and contesting the legitimacy of supranational actors. The most evident case regards the M5S and the European Stability Mechanism. Echoes of former anti-Europeanism emerged in December 2019 when a reform of the ESM had to be approved in the Italian Parliament, but it was not (Marzinotto 2020, 5-7).

Further opposition mounted when the EU proposed to use a reformed ESM to fund healthcare costs that had skyrocketed due to the pandemic. The Conte II government rejected the possibility of using such a financial instrument due to the conditionality and constraints the ESM funding could impose, mainly because they had abhorred these limitations for years in their political programmes (Bastasin 2021). However, the need to fund the post-pandemic economic emergency and recovery could not be ignored.

Soon after the onset of the pandemic, the EU had tried to tackle the emergency. However, the measures implemented were fragmented and addressed specific problems (e.g., the scarcity of sanitary products and masks) or keeping the EMU financial framework stable, notwithstanding the suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). The main risk, in this respect, was a collapse of the bond market for the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. The ECB countered this risk by creating in March 2020 the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP), an instrument funded with 750 (later augmented to 1,850) billion euros to buy assets on the secondary market.[17] Flexibility in EU rules and funds from the EU budget were also used to address the pandemic emergency. In addition, the EU established the Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), a temporary instrument to support member states' efforts to preserve employment.[18] The EU also recognized the impossibility of keeping in force many constraints imposed by EU economic governance in ordinary times, particularly those imposed by the Stability and Growth Pact, and suspended it on 23 March 2020.

[17] The fund was increased to 1,850 billion euros between June and December 2020. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/mopo/implement/pepp/html/index.en.html.
[18] The SURE establishment was proposed on 2 April 2020. However, it was activated only in late September 2020. https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-financial-assistance/sure_it.

While addressing the pandemic's immediate consequences, these measures were insufficient to support post-pandemic economic recovery. This applied particularly to countries like Italy and other Southern European member states that still had not recovered from the previous Eurozone crisis. On 17 March 2020, Conte himself urged EU partners to issue joint debt (the so-called Coronabonds) to tackle the financial needs of recovery. A few days later, Conte and other EU member states leaders sent a letter supporting the Coronabonds issue to the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

The negotiation for a European recovery policy, specifically for funding it and issuing Coronabonds, was painful and generated harsh contrasts between groups of member states. Some member countries were sceptical about the convenience of subsidies and jointly issued debt in favour of the Southern European debtor states. Echoes of the 2010s debate about common debt issues (the so-called Eurobonds) re-emerged.[19] Conte's pressures for direct EU financial support for the Italian recovery became vehement, and tension emerged with the German Chancellor Merkel.[20]

The debate and negotiations that followed finally led to the creation of the Next Generation EU programme (NGEU) in July 2020.[21] The NGEU required Italy to prepare a national plan (later called *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* or PNRR) to identify the specific activities to fund. These activities would have to lead Italy towards a general recovery which also included recovery from previous weakness and, in the Italian government's eyes, recovery from the thirty-year economic decline. Italy obtained almost 200 billion euros for funding its recovery plans. The main problem was then defining these plans in detail.

In April 2020, when Italy was still under a regime of maximum lockdown, the government established a committee led by the international manager Vittorio Colao to define a pandemic exit and recovery strategy for the Italian economy after lockdown. This committee produced a document dubbed the 'Colao plan'. This plan represents a link between the recovery strategy formulated in the Contract and the subsequent PNRR adopted by the Draghi government.

The Colao plan was admittedly less ambitious than the Contract or the PNRR. It aimed to advance proposals realizable within twelve months and did not consider most of the Italian economy's long-term problems that curbed its competitiveness and public debt sustainability. Thus, in the Colao plan, there was no space for institutional reform proposals or innovative strategies to challenge the Italian decline. Instead, most proposals aimed to relaunch economic activities and growth in the early post-pandemic years. The long-term perspective emerges only in the core proposals for economic and industrial recovery because they share the same aims of the EU (digitalization and the

[19] About Eurobonds and the Italian pressures for their creation, see European Commission (2011), Reuters (2011).

[20] In an interview with the German newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Conte openly criticised Merkel. He had already done the same a few days before in another interview with the German ARD TV channel. Rumours surfaced that Merkel had accused Conte of being childish in his pretention to obtain all he asked. Finally, Conte remained isolated in proposing Coronabonds, which were dismissed as a solution for recovery. See (Bastasin 2021).

[21] In official documents, references to the need to establish a Recovery Fund have circulated since April 2020. See Council of the EU (2020).

transition to a green and circular economy). Also, infrastructures have a central role in that plan, despite the fact that only some of them are new projects.

The most surprising characteristic of the Colao plan is the scarce attention devoted to the financial coverage of the proposals. Some references regard private capital and incentives for attracting it or public-private partnerships in financing industrial innovation and infrastructures. However, it lacks an explicit budget to identify the sources for funding investments, subsidies and incentives. The Colao plan was probably prepared with the idea that the EU recovery funds would arrive soon to feed its expensive proposals. Arguably, the return of Colao as a minister in the Draghi cabinet suggests his proposals were not just the personal consideration of an insulated group of experts.

4. Pleasing the EU. The PNRR from Conte II to Draghi government

The success of Conte in securing funds in the framework of the NGEU plan urged the definition of an Italian plan for recovery to organize funding activities that fitted with the requirements and the guidelines established by the EU. This turned out to be a very challenging task. Collecting and coordinating coherent proposals from the different Italian administrations was complicated. However, it was still more difficult to reconcile the different requests for funds and power distribution in the PNRR from the parties in the Conte II cabinet. Finally, the Conte II government collapsed, handing the power to Mario Draghi, who led the country until September 2022.

The NGEU immediately appeared as a historical opportunity for Italy because it solved the crucial problem that made the Contract economic strategy unfeasible: lack of funds and budgetary flexibility. In the meantime, such an option provoked bitter political conflicts in the government over the distribution of funds and the power to manage them because of the electoral and clientelist opportunities generated by the PNRR. Preparing the PNRR was also tricky because of the short time at the government's disposal to define a complex strategy for solving structural problems and overcoming the backwardness problems accumulated by Italy in the previous decades.

Theoretically, the Colao plan was a blueprint for the PNRR, whose preparation was facilitated by the EU framework to address innovation and industrial transformation milestones. Green and circular economies and digitalization are at the core of this framework, while gender balance is a general criterion to consider. Also, the EU guidelines impose the dedication of a share of funds to the green economy transition. Thus, the budget structure was, in part, predetermined.

The passage from Conte II to the Draghi government is also the story of the PNRR preparation and implementation. Therefore, an analysis of the different drafts (the one presented at the end of Conte II and the final version sent to Brussels by Draghi) helps to understand the progress towards an Italian recovery strategy initially destined to shape the country's future for years, and later made partially obsolete by the consequences of war in Ukraine.

The first step in preparing the PNRR was defining the strategic vision. In June 2020, the conference *Progettiamo il rilancio* (Planning the Relaunch) was organized in

Rome with different stakeholders affected by PNRR aims.[22] Thus, when in September 2020 the EU published the guidelines for writing the PNRR, the Colao plan and the results of conference debates contributed to defining the priorities to pursue. The EU policies and their priorities also addressed the recovery strategy depicted in the PNRR. In mid-October 2020, the Italian Parliament issued an act for the government (*Atto d'indirizzo*) to identify the contents of the PNRR, and on 7 December 2020, a first draft of the PNRR was presented in the Italian Council of Ministers for discussion. A new draft (here called Conte PNRR), to be used for debating with Parliament and stakeholders in view of submitting the final draft to Brussels, was approved by the Council of Ministers on 12 January 2021, and presented in the Italian Parliament on January 15. Two weeks later, after the withdrawal of Matteo Renzi's new Italia Viva party from the government, Prime Minister Conte resigned. During the discussion of the plan, tensions emerged between the M5S and Renzi's party, eventually causing Conte's resignation. Renzi accused Conte of supporting a PNRR draft that concentrated too much power in his hands. However, the real reasons for this crisis did not lie with the PNRR. Indeed, a comparison of the Conte and Draghi PNRR versions demonstrates that the differences are minimal and that, in the case of PNRR governance, the Draghi PNRR concentrated more power in the government's hands than the Conte PNRR (Guidi and Moschella 2021, 422).

When, on 13 February 2021, Mario Draghi's government took office, preparing the PNRR was the most important and urgent mission for the new executive. However, the vast parliamentary majority that supported the government granted Draghi an almost free hand to adjust the PNRR (here called PNRR Draghi) and submit it to Brussels, despite the fact that some critical points that had emerged in PNRR Conte and been criticized by the EU Commission had not been solved.[23] The Draghi PNRR was submitted to Brussels on 30 April 2021, and approved on 13 July 2021.

The Italian recovery strategy then entirely concentrated on the PNRR and on obtaining the EU funds. The needs of the PNRR permeated Italian politics as a whole. Accomplishing the missions and respecting the roadmap indicated by the EU Commission for realizing reforms and implementing the PNRR became the core of Italian economic policy. Draghi became the *deus ex machina* of Italian politics and the most (maybe the only) point of reference for the EU institutions in guaranteeing Italian credibility and compliance with the agreements. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Draghi was the most authoritative among European leaders and adopted a firm position against Russia, despite the risks for the Italian and European economies from the impact of sanctions and the Russian reaction in terms of gas supply cuts. When these consequences became evident to Italian voters, and some reforms carried out to fulfil the EU requests and implement the PNRR were relaxed or openly opposed by some majority parties, Draghi resigned.

[22] An alternative translation could be Planning Economic Revitalisation due to the specific aims of the debate.

[23] These problems mainly regarded quantitative estimates of the impact the PNRR could have in the different sectors it affects.

5. The strategies for Italian recovery and the PNRR: comparing the plans

The Conte II and the Draghi PNRRs are very similar, despite the fact that the Draghi PNRR dedicated more attention than Conte to the reform issue. However, it must be kept in mind that the Conte PNRR was a preliminary draft of the final PNRR version prepared by the Draghi government. Thus, it was to be expected that the final version would be more detailed and pay more attention to those topics that the Commission was keener on.

The similarities between the two PNRRs also emerge from comparing the funds' distribution (Table 1). Differences are minimal, apart from a transfer from the budget item Green Revolution to the item Education and Research, and a redistribution of funds internal to the item Green Revolution from the sub-item Energy Efficiency and Building Requalification to the sub-item Energy Transition and Sustainable Local Mobility. This redistribution is coherent with the transition from the Conte government, which implemented a subsidy policy to finance the energy efficiency of buildings, to the Draghi government, which acknowledged the criticism against those norms regarding abuses and problematic implementation.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note some crucial differences between the Draghi and Conte PNRRs and the Colao plan. While the Colao plan shares the centrality of Green Transition and Digitalization issues with the PNRR plans, it also pays attention to the banking sector and credit problems and the fragmentation of Italian firms, which need instruments and funds for recapitalization and support for export. Also, the Colao plan considers the need to support Italian firms in taking advantage of post-pandemic reshoring opportunities that could be important for reorganizing the Italian industrial system and increasing jobs.[24] Finally, the Colao plan explicitly describes essential strategic criteria not revealed in the later PNRRs.

Despite the fact that the logic of the Colao plan and that of the PNRR are similar and mainly based on investment for short- and mid-term recovery and stimulating internal demand, the rationale for these investments is deeply influenced by specific internal problems that could limit the effectiveness of the PNRR in supporting mid-and-long-term growth. The Colao plan refers explicitly to infrastructures at the end of their lifecycle that need rebuilding. In reality, many infrastructures had been depleted by lack of maintenance and excessive usage because of predatory activities by private concessionaires and the corruption of controlling officers. [25] Many of these infrastructures are included in the PNRR. Other funds had been devoted to repairing school buildings and coastal infrastructures depleted by decades of neglect. Thus, part of the PNRR funds will not generate growth

[24] Reshoring regards a return to the homeland of national industries and production formerly moved offshore to countries which offer opportunities to save taxes or pay lower wages. The pandemic shows how offshoring could create fragile supply chains and hinder the production of firms which use components produced abroad. The supply side problems also emerged in sanitary and other strategic supplies. The convenience of supporting and funding reshoring then became evident also for governments.

[25] The Morandi Bridge collapse is Italy's primary and dramatic example of an infrastructural crisis. After this tragedy, many infrastructures were discovered to be at risk, but there was no space in the Italian public budget for a national plan for infrastructural rebuilding. Also, Morandi's case nudged the Conte I government towards a punitive policy against private concessionaires, threatening to revoke concessions without compensation. However, the Conte I government had no time to carry this proposal to its conclusion. The fall of the Conte II government seemed to be in conjunction with a turning point in the concessions issue.

returns; they will just avoid the collapse of bridges and roads and allow us to keep today's infrastructures working. Repairing existing infrastructures will not change the Italian economy, offering new opportunities and creating new industrial sectors as new and modern infrastructures can. Thus, only that part of the PNRR funds devoted to new infrastructures can improve Italian industrial competitiveness and generate the GDP growth required to repay NGEU loans. This means that the PNRR's effectiveness in counteracting Italian decline by acting as a long-term recovery plan is limited.

Many criticisms emerged after the approval and the initial steps for implementing the PNRR. The excessive fragmentation noted in the Conte PNRR (Guidi and Moschella 2021, 408) was not solved by the Draghi PNRR. The problem of implementation planning detected by the Conte PNRR critics (Baratta 2021) emerged during the early implementation phase (Viesti 2022). Also, the poor involvement of Italian regions (Profeti e Baldi 2021) in PNRR definition reduced their role to competitors for funds. Failure to assign a coordination role to the regions, and the dramatic limits of the administrative capability of municipalities, will probably be a major problem in the next steps of PNRR implementation.

The relevance of the PNRR as a recovery policy is evident in its short-term recovery potential. Instead, its ability to tackle Italian economic decline is more doubtful. Investments will inject liquidity into the Italian economic system and will favour post-pandemic recovery in those sectors affected by the plan. It will probably help relaunch the economy through the infrastructural expenditures, acting as a driving force, and support new start-ups with subsidies and, less certainly, with a reorganization of taxes and bureaucratic dues.

However, some other crucial problems remain poorly considered or wholly unaddressed. The PNRR assigns a relevant role to advanced training and research to support industrial renewal and long-term growth. However, no appropriate reforms are planned for the university nor has the creation of an efficient link between universities and industries been defined. The aim of attracting PhD holders and skilled technicians to the public administration is bound to fail due to the unattractiveness of the jobs offered. This puts at risk the full implementation of the plan, also considering the short time provided for its implementation (2026). Thus, while expenses could support the post-pandemic recovery anyway, the risk is that long-term recovery will be undermined by the likely partial failure of PNRR implementation. On the other hand, some crucial measures for solving the Italian decline problem are not eligible for PNRR funds. The reorganization of the financial and banking sector, a general institutional reform, and all of the problems of Italy's re-insertion into the EMU governance framework when the SGP is re-activated remain unsolved and unaffected by a recovery policy based on the PNRR.

The impact of the war in Ukraine could dramatically change the effectiveness of the PNRR, creating shortage-based inflation, the closure of export markets, and turbulence in European macroeconomic and financial dynamics. The first effects of war inflation have already emerged to hinder the allocation of PNRR funds because of rising costs that have made signing contracts problematic. On the other hand, the turn towards green energy is unavoidable today due to the suspension of economic relations with the EU's leading energy supplier. This could help to avoid the obsolescence of PNRR strategies.

Table 1. Comparison between the budget of the PNRR as defined by the Conte II and Draghi Governments

	Nominal Values (billions of euros)			%		
	Conte	**Draghi**	**Balance**	**Conte**	**Draghi**	**Balance**
Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness and Culture	**46.3**	**50.07**	**3.77**	**20.68**	**21.29**	**0.62**
Digitization, innovation and security in Public Administration	11.75	10.95	-0.80	5.25	4.66	-0.59
Digitization, innovation and competitiveness of the production system	26.55	30.98	4.43	11.86	13.18	1.32
Tourism and Culture 4.0	8.00	8.13	0.13	3.57	3.46	-0.12
Green Revolution and Ecological Transition	**69.8**	**69.96**	**0.16**	**31.17**	**29.75**	**-1.42**
Green Business and Circular Economy	7.00	6.97	-0.03	3.13	2.96	-0.16
Energy transition and sustainable local mobility	18.22	25.36	7.14	8.14	10.79	2.65
Energy efficiency and building requalification	29.55	22.26	-7.29	13.20	9.47	-3.73
Protection and enhancement of land and water resources	15.03	15.37	0.34	6.71	6.54	-0.18
Infrastructure for Sustainability Mobility	**31.98**	**31.46**	**-0.52**	**14.28**	**13.38**	**-0.90**
High-speed railway and road maintenance	28.30	27.97	-0.33	12.64	11.90	-0.74
Intermodality and integrated logistics	3.68	3.49	-0.19	1.64	1.48	-0.16
Education and Research	**28.49**	**33.81**	**5.32**	**12.72**	**14.38**	**1.66**
Skills enhancement and study support	16.72	20.89	4.17	7.47	8.88	1.42
From research to business	11.77	12.92	1.15	5.26	5.49	0.24
Inclusion and Cohesion	**27.63**	**29.62**	**1.99**	**12.34**	**12.60**	**0.26**
Employment policies	12.62	12.63	0.01	5.64	5.37	-0.26
Social infrastructure, families, communities and the voluntary sector	10.83	12.58	1.75	4.84	5.35	0.51
Special geographical cohesion measures	4.18	4.41	0.23	1.87	1.88	0.01
Healthcare	**19.72**	**20.22**	**0.50**	**8.81**	**8.60**	**-0.21**
Community-based care and telemedicine	7.90	9.00	1.10	3.53	3.83	0.30
Innovation, research and digitization of healthcare	11.82	11.22	-0.60	5.28	4.77	-0.51
TOTAL	**223.92**	**235.14**	**11.22**	**100.00**	**100.00**	**0.00**

Sources: Camera dei Deputati, *Proposta di Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza presentata dal Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri*, January 15 2021, (PNRR Conte), p. 22; *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza #Next Generation Italia*, final version (PNRR Draghi). P. 22.

6. Conclusions

During the XVIII Italian legislature, three different governments alternated in power. Each of them proposed recovery policies that combined in different ways solutions proposed to solve the crucial short-term and long-term problems of the Italian economy. The main differences between these recovery policies regarded the nature of the problems and the role of the EU in solving them. The Conte I recovery policy mainly targeted long-term economic decline and the competitiveness gap that Italy had accumulated in previous decades. Instead, the Conte II and the Draghi governments mainly focused on the pandemic's consequences and the need for post-pandemic recovery, leaving aside some structural problems previously addressed in the Colao plan and the populist economic programmes. The first Conte government combined a European-like plan in the industrial policy field centred on a green and circular economy and an anti-EU attitude that contemplated exiting the EMU and abandoning the euro, at least as last-resort option. The core of the Conte I recovery policy failed because of its inconsistency, budget narrowness, and the impossibility of mobilizing additional financial resources over the limits imposed by the EU. When the pandemic made the Italian situation desperate, the NGEU allowed the Italian government to fund part of the previous recovery policy, privileging those items that fitted EU requirements. However, the long-term objectives of the Conte I government had to be redefined and restricted to be coherent with the PNRR. Thus, under the Draghi government, the PNRR became the primary (if not the only) plan for recovery and attention was concentrated entirely on its implementation, while other crucial weaknesses of the Italian economic system remained unchallenged. In particular, the Italian position in the EMU governance framework when the Stability and Growth Pact is reactivated remains problematic. Defining a long-term recovery strategy for Italy remains crucial for tackling Italian economic decline and the impact of the Eurozone crisis and the pandemic on the Italian economy. The limits of the PNRR in this field – its implementation problems, the lack of political projects in tackling the political and institutional ineffectiveness of the country, and the economic and electoral consequences of the war in Ukraine – suggest that the mission will be particularly challenging.

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